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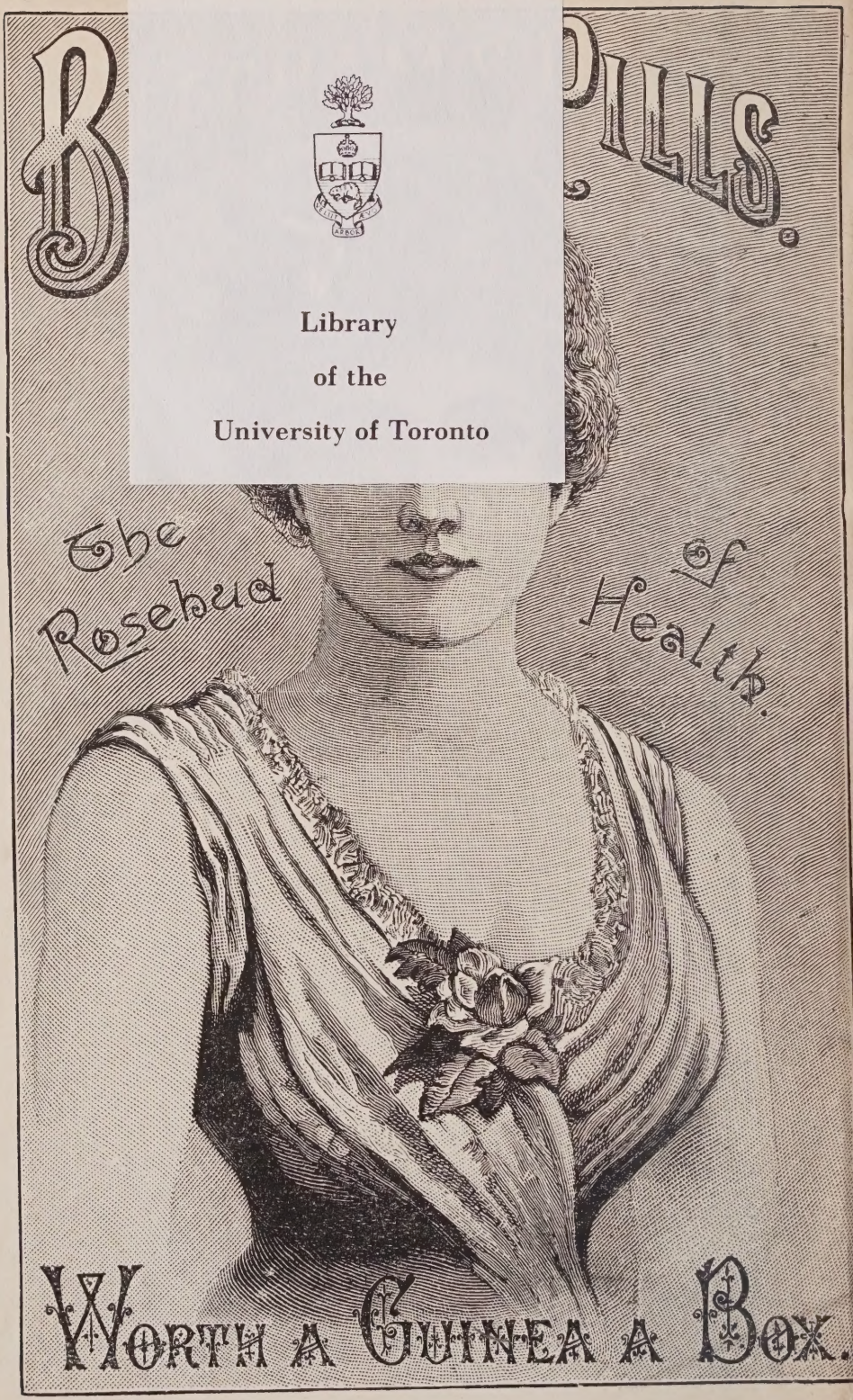

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CHAPTER I.

JACK TAKES ME BY SURPRISE.

I have seen many things in the course of a chequered existence, but none stranger than those that made and marred the life of a friend of mine. He was one of those that sticketh closer than a brother and whose love passeth that of women, who at the best bring more sorrow than joy into this world. The events of my own life have not been always in the very smoothest channel but my very sorrows have made me pity misfortune wherever I met it and a great charity has sprung up in my heart as it must also in yours, if you had gone through what I did. Ah well, if you have patience to read all I have to say and if I say it as it all fell out you will understand. No doubt if fate had been more kind to me and life had not, as the phrase goes, disappointed me, I might have been less hard on the world. Yet I think I could have borne my own trials in patience and not become the man I am had I not seen what came to him, my friend,

the best, most honest fellow that ever trod shoe leather. And yet who knows if his case will touch other hearts as it has mine and after all, they may only find it one of those common things that are always happening and not worth making a fuss about. It may be only wasting time in trying to make others see how one woman can make the whole world wrong; and will any one ever take warning by another's experience? I doubt it. A man does not choose as a rule, unless necessity compels, to buy a coat ready made, and when all is said and done, perhaps experiences like coats are better fitted and made for the back that has to carry them. Mother Eve and Helen of Troy stand out preeminent in history as instances of how ruin comes, carried by a pair of soft white feminine hands, and who has taken warning by their stories, and how shall I make one man consider or weigh things in the scale against a pair of warm lips or bright eyes, when even the Bible and old Homer have failed. Who will take notice of a tale of yesterday more than one of centuries old and not lay the flattering unction to his soul that he is to be the exception that proves the rule? Indeed he would be a sad sort of lover and not worth the name if he did not think so. You see I don't delude myself into thinking it will help much to tell my tale, but it is a relief to my own feelings and if I persuade one of my fellow creatures to look before he leaps I shall be

satisfied. I can tell it so much better now too because the whole of the drama is played out, and it is easier to see the plot than if it were to be shown act by act.

I remember very well how I first saw Jack Darnley. He came to Eton, as a little lad when I was already in 'tails' and the friendship that began then lasted the rest of our lives. His boyish days and mine passed as most of them do for us all in a succession of amusements, scrapes and what not, and how happy they were, one can hardly appreciate better than in talking over them with one's old companions. With these young days however I have not to do now and the commencement of Jack's real story was when he was twenty-five and I a few years his senior.

I was sitting one afternoon in an armchair reading and smoking before dressing to dine at my club, idling away a time when there was nothing better to employ me than a novel and a cigar. I have always been more or less of an idler ever since I was at Eton, for I am one of those blessed or cursed with a competence enough to live on without work, a thing that has spoilt many a better man than I am.

Jack was better off than I in more ways than one, he was a strong handsome fellow, of which no one could accuse me in their wildest moments, and a circumstance that perhaps conduced to his being even more spoilt than his exterior warranted was the fact of his being very rich.

Wcmen naturally, by the laws of selection perhaps, like a handsome man, and if the gods have endowed him with the good things of this earth as well, he is still more sure to find favour in their eyes. He had had a long minority, and was in possession of a large estate which, owing to careful management was unencumbered and his income amounted to some twenty thousand a year all told. He had never been guilty of a mean action in his life, but to counterbalance this had seldom done a wise one, but such as they were he had generally told me all, asked my advice in his many scrapes and but seldom taken it. So you may guess it was no surprise when I heard my door open to find it was Jack's voice that greeted me.

"Val," said he, as he threw his coat down on a sofa and laid his hat on it, "I am really in for a serious thing this time, and have come to ask your advice."

I smiled, recollecting how often he had repeated the old formula of asking my advice with almost always the identical result of utterly disregarding it when given. However as he addressed me more seriously than usual I prepared myself to listen and doing my best to hide my incredulity as to anything being serious to Jack, I replied:

"Pay your penny and take your choice—of a chair, I mean, and fire away."

He sat down in a chair opposite to me, and leaning his elbows on his knees looked gravely at me without

saying a word, and I noticed that he seemed embarrassed about commencing the conversation. This was an almost overpowering astonishment to me, Valentine Trentham, who had known him since he wore short jackets and to whom he had always been wont to pour out his joys and woes with no more preamble than sufficed to form the words he spoke. I should under any other circumstances probably have asked him if his business was with pitch and toss or manslaughter, but seeing him so evidently in a more than normal fix thought it best to hold my tongue and wait till he began to speak.

At last taking his watch out of his pocket and swinging it slowly to and fro and looking at it intently, which manoeuvre made me think he did not want to catch my eye while he spoke, he began:

"Don't laugh, Val, like a good fellow, but I am going to get married."

Here we were *in medias res* with a vengeance, and I, being but human, could not forbear smiling as I said, "My dear boy, you must excuse my laughing, it is only at the idea of a fellow first saying he is going to ask your advice and then telling you that he is going to be married as if that announcement admitted of a word more being said. Anyhow if you are to be married tell me to whom, when and where, three questions easy to answer, and admitting so far as concerns the first, of ample scope for your eloquence."

"Dash it all, Val, can you never stop chaffing a fellow?" said Jack half angrily, "I tell you I am serious and if I had any other pal in whom I could confide I wouldn't come to you for anything important in the way of advice."

"Well, Jack, advice doesn't seem to my mind an appropriate thing, when a man announces his intentions as being already fixed, but as it doesn't cost money I will give it you and you can throw it away without being the poorer. Now tell me all the news."

"It's all very odd, Val, and I know before I begin what you'll say, and your opinion will be that of the majority of course. Anyhow you must know it sooner or later, so I had better take the bull by the horns and tell you. By Jove it's hard to know how to put it in the best way through," said he, again swinging his watch about.

By this time I was thoroughly curious to know what all this meant, and my curiosity was not altogether unmixed with suspicion. I had known Jack since the time of his youth and I knew how chivalrous, nay, quixotic he was, and all sorts of visions of fair women floated through my brain, and fair as they might be, I had more than one misgiving that their ways might be foul; and I conjured up all sorts of means by which my poor Jack might have been entrapped into a foolish marriage. He with his large income and larger heart might be sacrificing himself to some fair adventuress who had discovered that he had a tempting

share of this world's goods, and been astute enough to hide her knowledge and appeal to him through his heart alone. It is not my custom to smoke much before dinner, but tobacco is a solace and a good clearer to the brain in any anxiety, so I lighted a fresh cigar and waited till it suited Jack to pull himself together to explain.

He looked up at me suddenly after a few moments more and said: "You know, don't you, Val, I have been knocking about lately from one place to another shooting?"

"Yes," I said, "and instead of shooting pheasants with a pair of guns you have got shot yourself by a pair of eyes. It doesn't take a Solomon to guess that much."

"Well," he went on, as if I had not opened my lips, "at Basingfield, the last place I stayed in, I met her, and oh Val, she is quite all that any fellow can wish for, you don't know how pretty and fresh and young." His eyes grew bright, and now at least I could see that at any rate he was in love, and I hoped all the more that he was not the victim of any plot. "She was there with her mother," he went on, "who is a black browed tall woman with a deep voice and a commanding presence, the sort of female one instinctively dreads for a mother-in-law. They are South Americans and of Spanish extraction, De Mora by name."

"And what is her name, by *her* I mean the only she in the world of course," say I sententiously.

"Juanita," replies Jack, not noticing my sarcasm, "and she is the very opposite in all ways to Mrs. De Mora, fair as a lily, with a cloud of golden hair in little curls and waves all over her head, and a pair of eyes as blue as the Meditterranean Sea."

He paused a moment evidently dwelling upon her enchantments, and I felt it my duty to make some remark which I did in the following words. "The eyes are all right of course, Jack, as there is no chemical process that I am acquainted with to beautify them, but don't put your faith in the wavy golden hair. Curling tongs and auroline do wonders in that direction I am told."

"Val, you old sinner," says Jack, with a laugh of incredulity, for, poor fellow, he was too heavily smitten to see that there was even a possibility of his being mistaken, "I believe if you had had the apple entrusted to you, you would have insisted upon a chemical analysis before you awarded it to Venus. Does it strike you by the way that if you interrupt me like this I shall never get to the end of my story, so had you not better shut up?"

"All right, old boy," and in truth I felt half ashamed of myself, and settled down in my armchair, determined to listen patiently to all his confidences.

"The Grahams met Mrs. De Mora and her daughter at Homburg last season," went on Jack, "and it was there they made acquaintance and old Graham, who to give him

his due, is very hospitable, asked them to stay when they came to England. This they did and I met them as you know at Basingfield with the result that I have told you. Now beyond the fact that they are half Spanish, and that they seem to have plenty of money and to be ladies, I know nothing of them. However I don't care two straws if they are as poor as church mice, I have plenty of cash and I mean to marry Juanita, but if there is anything wrong I don't mean to marry the mother too, and so I want your advice as to how to find out, as I mean to pension the mother rather than have to give her a home after I have married her daughter."

I hardly knew what to say, as it is not a pretty state of things when a man comes to ask your advice about such a delicate matter as a prospective mother-in-law's affairs, and I confess to a certain feeling of cowardice, in so far as interference in the concerns of a lady of the type described by my friend went. A remark was incumbent upon me, and the only thing I could think of was:

"Well, it's a deuced awkward thing to find out, Jack, and I don't know how you can do it, but my advice to you is to wait a bit before you take the irrevocable step, and in the mean time you and I both must try and pick up any information we can. By the way do you know any friends of Mrs. De Mora's?"

"Well, no, Val, I can't say I do," answered he evasively, "of course the Grahams know them but I can't go and

ask them all sorts of questions, you know. I tell you what it is *you* must find out all you can for me."

"Hang it all, Jack, it is straining a point of friendship to ask a fellow to find all the ins and outs of the career of a future mother-in-law. Why the dickens didn't you do it before you proposed to the fascinating damsel her daughter?"

This I know I said rather sulkily for the private detective business is not at all in my line, and also I had a dim foreshadowing that the result of my enquiries might in all probability not be as acceptable to Jack as I could wish.

"You even, sceptic as you are, Val, would not have waited to know all the past of the mother, had you been as much in love with the daughter as I am," said Jack with a quiet determination in his manner.

This quite assured me that it was hopeless to argue, and if I wanted to help my friend the best plan would be to get all the information I could, so as at any rate to save him from the depredations of a designing mother-in-law, should she be of that description. I felt however that nothing would induce him to wait long and whatever was to be done had better be quickly over. I therefore determined to find out all I could of the De Mora's antecedents, but as my mind is one of those slow working machines that require time to accomplish their task, I felt obliged to ask Jack to leave me to think out the best plan of action;

and as soon as I had any news to tell him, it was agreed that I should send him a line, for although we were members of the same clubs, and in all probability would meet every day, yet as Jack's many shooting and hunting engagements took him often to the country, it was better to arrange to talk with him at my rooms, than trust to a chance meeting. When this was fixed and he had given me the address that would find him for the next few days, for with the traditional impatience of a lover, he imagined that a day or two would do the work of years, he left me. Of course he was going down to Brighton, where the De Moras were staying for a short time, as he could not remain quietly in any place far away from his enchantress.

When I had thought over Jack's communication, I came to the conclusion that the details of the case were most meagre, and all I knew was that Mrs. De Mora had a daughter to whom my friend had proposed, and that they were supposed to be Spanish Americans, and seemed rich, and to be in a good position. No one knew who their friends were, and they had suddenly appeared on the social horizon like comets on the heavenly one, and were even more brilliant and less easily accounted for. Anyhow speculation was idle. There was not enough to justify suspicion, so I gave up thinking for the time being, and after I had dressed strolled off to my club to dine, determined to find some one or other of my many acquaintances there

who had been to Homburg during the season, and to open the campaign by asking if anything was known about the ladies in question. The success I met with I will unfold at a future time, and in the meantime we must follow Jack to Brighton. The reader must remember that I tell the tale as it happened by the light of subsequent experience, and although I was not an eye witness to the working of events, yet I can give a full and true account of them, one by one, just as if I had been present. I draw upon my imagination only for some small details, but the main facts are given as I know them to have taken place, and I transcribe them as nearly as I can in their proper order.

CHAPTER II.

A LOVER'S HASTE.

Jack hurried off the next morning to Brighton with a heart full of expectation, and a certain amount of remorse in his inmost soul for having been able to doubt, even for one instant, the charms of his enslaver's mother, for so much in love was he that he was ready to endow even his prospective mother-in-law with every grace and virtue, simply because she had presented such a treasure to the world as was his fiancée. Poor Jack was almost ashamed of his doubts of the previous evening, and tried to persuade himself that his liver must have been out of order to make him so suspicious; and half determined to telegraph to me to stop any enquiries I might think of making.

The train in which he sat seemed to crawl, yet it was going full speed towards the girl he loved and would soon marry, and the nearer he got the more he felt at peace with all mankind. Every thought was of her and there was no room for a doubt or a fear of the future. She was his future, by her alone could come joy or sorrow, and as she

was good and true, he thought, nothing but the best things that life can give were in store for him. He was rich and had an estate that was unfettered by any of those charges that weigh so heavily upon the average land owner, so that even in his most pessimistic moods money, or rather the want of it, could not cause him a moment's anxiety, and as he lay back on the cushions of the railway carriage he fancied himself one of the most favoured of mortals. As he sped past mile after mile of the country lying between London and Brighton, heaven knows what castles in the air he did not build about his future, which, like the peasant girl with the basket of eggs on her head, that were to sell to such profit at the neighbouring market, he had already turned into pure gold before it was realized. When he was married he would live in the country most of the year, only too happy to be alone with his wife, and when he came to London for the season she would be the prettiest woman, and the most envied for all that his fortune could buy her, and all this would be his doing, and he would be so proud of her: although he did not own this part of his feelings, he doubtless congratulated himself upon having been wise enough to secure all these good and enviable things, and put it down to his superior wisdom and perspicacity. Once or twice a qualm stole over him about Mrs. De Mora, only to be banished instantly, for was she not *her* mother, and he could not suffer his mind

to dwell on such rank heresy as a doubt about anything that belonged to his lady love. It takes a long time to write this, but it did not occupy one quarter of Jack's journey, and so at last he took up the newspapers that he had bought to wile away the time, but not one word did he read, and so much was he thinking of Juanita, that he fancied he saw a likeness to her in a picture he found outside one of the covers, in which ordinary eyes would have found no resemblance, and further than that his eyes never wandered, and his poor foolish brain reverted to the subject nearest his heart. He owned to this episode in after years when telling me of how much in love he had been once upon a time. Well, well, Jack was only five and twenty and desperately in love, the only excuses I can find for his not landing himself in a lunatic asylum at the end of his journey. This idea of mine however I never confided to him, in case he should think I was uncomplimentary, or laughing at him, neither of which sentiments would have been agreeable to him at the time. In the first flush of a serious love, such as that Jack now felt, the most unbearable of all things is a friend who dares to ridicule either the sentiments of the lover, or throw a doubt upon the eternity of the passion itself, and knowing this I did not tell Jack with what caution I regarded his statements as to the lastingness of his feelings. There is something very touching in the faith in himself that an honest love puts in the heart of every

man, let him be as thoughtless as he likes before the time comes when a woman's love arouses his better nature. Far be it from me then to ridicule the happiness of a young lover, for, old as I am, I have still the recollection of some of my best days having been spent in reflection over just such silly ecstasies as Jack's, and although I cannot help seeing the ludicrous side of it now, yet I am glad I have not been condemned to spend my life in such a vegetable way, as not to have known some pleasant follies in my time.

Jack hardly waited for the train to draw up before he had his rug over his arm, and flung his bag to a porter, telling him to look sharp and get a cab, and put his traps in as he was in a hurry. Off he drove giving the address of Mrs. De Mora's house, putting half a crown into the hand of the astonished porter, who stood gazing after him, inwardly determining that he must do his best to remember his face, dress, and luggage, in case of any enquiry by the police, for nothing short of a criminal or an escaped lunatic could act in such a way, according to the porter's views.

He drove up to the house and rang the bell asking if Mrs. and Miss De Mora were at home, and to his intense disappointment found they were not expected to return for half an hour, so making the best of a bad bargain he went to the hotel and ordered his room and left his luggage, two things quite necessary for his comfort, but which in excitement of anticipation he had hitherto forgotten. This

done he strolled back again feeling as if he had been away half the day, although his watch told him that it was barely a half hour since he had last rung the bell. As he went into the room Juanita sprang up with a blush, holding out both hands with a pretty gesture, like a child to whom one offers a favourite toy, and said "Jack" then, as suddenly and as if half ashamed of her boldness and with a quick look at her mother, she dropped one hand by her side and giving the other to him, said in the ordinary terms of the regulation drawing room welcome.

"We are both so glad to see you, how good of you to come so soon."

Jack inwardly anathematised the word 'both' as implying the presence of a third person, but as he knew he was powerless to help it for the moment, he did the best he could, and turned to Mrs. De Mora, shaking hands and making some stereotyped remark of polite greeting. Somehow when he looked at her, and saw her dark eyes fixed on him, he could hardly help a shudder, for he could not get the impression out of his head for hours after that he had caught a flash of almost hatred, malice and all uncharitableness in that look. And yet he must have been mistaken, for not one second elapsed before she took his hand and showing her white even teeth in a slow smile, she spoke in her usual way, which was always in a measured style, and with a careful choice of words.

"My daughter is quite right to say we are both very glad to see you. We are already enjoying the air and the gaiety of Brighton, and naturally your arrival will add an extra attraction. This goes without saying for my daughter, but to assure you how welcome you are, may I again use Juanita's words, and say to us both."

Again the word rang unpleasantly on Jack's ears and some of his old misgivings came floating to his brain and his inward remark was: "Yes, Val Trantham must find out about her. I could not have one peaceful moment with such a mother-in-law in the house. By Jove, what an eye the woman has got." However he said aloud,

"You are too kind, Mrs. De Mora, of course I could not keep away long, but if I had known how warm a welcome was awaiting me, I should have come even sooner."

After a few more commonplaces Mrs. De Mora got up from her chair, and saying: "Of course you will lunch with us Jack, — you must allow me to call you so since we are to become related, — and now I will leave you both to talk over your own affairs until it is ready," she left the room.

Jack felt he could almost have kissed her for absenting herself, but on second thoughts he contented himself with kissing Juanita, a much more satisfactory way of showing his delight. My experience of these matters is, that all conversations carried on under these circumstances, are desultory and uninteresting, except to those persons im-

mediately concerned, therefore even if Jack had told me all that passed, I should not think it worth reproduction and shall occupy myself by giving a description of Mrs. De Mora, and her daughter, as they appeared to my eyes.

Jack was not overstating the case when he told me Juanita was one of the loveliest women you could wish to see, and this is a wonder, for one of the first signs of such a midsummer madness as his, is an undue tendency to magnify the attractions of the cause of the complaint. She was truly a very beautiful creature, and of a type calculated to destroy the peace of mind which an allwise Providence has given to man, to facilitate his progress through a world abounding with disturbing elements. I am not good at descriptions of female beauty, and in truth it would seem to me, who have seen her, a very inadequate account of Juanita to catalogue her points of appearance as one could those of a horse, her fascination did not lie alone in regularity of feature or brilliancy of colouring, although she was possessed of both: it was an indescribable something, that appealed to the innermost recesses of the male heart, and to which, in a minor degree, I became subject myself. She was rather below than above the average height, but so slender that she gave one the idea of being a tall woman until as Jack told me one day, borrowing one of the prettiest ideas of an old writer, he stood by her and found she was just the right height to reach up

to his heart. Her eyes were of that peculiar colour that is not grey and not blue, but a little of both, a combination that is capable of lights and shades unknown in other hues, looking, when the shade of her dark lashes was over them, like one of the still pools in the rocks on the Mediterranean shore, and when she was laughing or angry they shone like the blade of a well tempered sword. These two similes seem to me to explain more what I mean by grey and blue than any others I can find. I give them for what they are worth and not to force my notions as to colour upon the better informed in such matters. Her complexion was pale, but so apt to grow tinted with little quick ebbs of colour, that one could never say it was two moments the same, and each thought seemed to bring either a brighter or a fainter glow, just as it affected her lightly or the reverse. Her hair was golden, not of the pale ashy hue it is the fashion to call by that name, but the rich tint of the old Venetian painters that some heretics with modern ideas call red, and it shone in the sun, much after the same fashion as I have seen the flanks of a chestnut thoroughbred do.

In short she was as nearly perfect as any human being can be; and I don't think anything more lovely would be allowed to walk about the world, with the consent of the higher powers, for fear of causing a general tumult. Mrs. De Mora was as different as one could well imagine, but for all

that decidedly handsome and well preserved, although she bore evident traces of having repaired the ravages of time by the subtle aid of art. It is much easier to describe her than Juanita, and a very fair idea is given of her by drawing her most noticeable features. Far above the average height and of an almost massive build, she looked truly a formidable woman, and her strong white hands seemed admirably calculated to hold tightly whatever might fall into them, and betokened a decision of character that might be awkward on emergencies. Her hair was black and with no trace of grey, and her strongly marked eyebrows had a trick of contracting themselves, over her nose and full black eyes, in a slightly ominous fashion. The most noticeable thing of all however, was her mouth, wide and with the lips curving slightly up at the corners like a cat's; and she had a smile that seemed to come quite slowly and extend from corner to corner of the mouth, showing a set of faultlessly white teeth, very square and short and even. This smile was the more remarkable as it left the eyes and the rest of the face unmoved, giving anything but an impression of amusement, and if I may speak from my own experience, instilling a feeling nearly akin to dread into the heart of the beholder. It did not take me long to make up my mind to do my best to keep her out of Jack's house, and the first time I saw that chilling and terrible smile flickering on her lips,

settled my doubts as to the propriety of enquiring into her past. That she had a past, of a pretty startling kind, it was impossible to doubt, and no one with average intellect, unless it had been stolen away as had poor Jack's by the lovely Juanita, would have dared to ally himself to such a lady without some enquiry. Roughly speaking this was the impression made by these two ladies on my mind when I met them for the first time, not long after the day of which I have been speaking when Jack went to see them in Brighton. He has told me since that he found the time till luncheon that day pass like lightning, but that he sat down to the meal in almost unmixed agony, because he had pressed Juanita hard to fix their wedding day and she had told him to "arrange with Mama" the most convenient time. It must indeed have been a fearful and awful thought to have to plead to that stony looking woman with her icy smile; and had I been Jack I know I should have remained a bachelor to my dying day if matrimony depended upon the consent of Mrs. De Mora. At last the fateful moment could no longer be evaded, and Jack found himself hot about the cheeks, nervous and thoroughly uncomfortable, standing by Mrs. De Mora's chair asking her to grant him a few minutes talk in private.

"I shall be delighted," she answered after a slight pause during which she had showed him her brilliant teeth, for

he owned afterwards that even from the very first he always thought she looked as if she was going to bite when she smiled. "Perhaps I can guess upon what subject you wish to speak. Will you come with me into the drawing-room where we shall be undisturbed."

Jack followed her, feeling miserable and trying to collect his thoughts to enable him to put his request into words befitting the occasion. Why is it that love, the most ennobling of all sentiments, has such a stultifying effect upon the intellect. I have known a man, with quite his proper complement of brains, become a miserable image where his heart was concerned, as devoid of sense as a squeezed orange of juice. Inspiration was as far from him as ever as he closed the door of the drawing-room, and found himself tête à tête with Mrs. De Mora, so in despair he took the bull by the horns and said:

"You were kind enough, Mrs. De Mora, to say you guessed partly what I wanted to talk to you about. You know I want to marry your daughter and she has referred me to you to know how soon it can be."

He was quite aware that he had stated his case in the most bald and uninteresting way, but for the life of him he could not find any other words handy. Also he was prepared for a certain amount of the usual phrases expected from a mother under the circumstances, of regret to part with her daughter, and even he might have nerved himself to see

a tear or two, but his astonishment and discomfort knew no bounds when Mrs. De Mora only smiled again and replied,

"Of course I guessed this and knew it must come, when do you wish it to be?"

It is true that she turned a shade paler and seemed to take every precaution to avoid looking him in the face. This he attributed to emotion on her part, but never the less the words, and the constrained tone of voice, startled him and he felt it none the easier to continue.

"Well, of course," said he hesitatingly, feeling he was treading on delicate ground, "there must be certain formalities, but if you will give me the name of your lawyer I will send mine to him; and as I shall make it my first thought to arrange all the business to your entire satisfaction, I think there cannot be any trouble, and to make a long story short will you allow us to be married as soon as this is all settled?"

In the last few words he could not help his intense eagerness from creeping out, and he was most impatient till the answer came: "You must remember that I am a foreigner. and therefore can refer you to no one in the legal profession in England, but I have no hesitation in confiding my daughter's interests to your hands and to your lawyer's, and it will suffice for me if you will show me any provisions that your generosity may lead you to make for her future; and as I am sure they will be worthy

of your position, and open heart, I can almost promise that the wedding need not be delayed longer than the time necessary for their completion demands."

Jack was sufficiently in possession of his senses to know that all this referred to the settlements, disguised in such beautiful language as he had in vain sought for when he blundered through his own communication, and he was idiotic enough to think that anyhow he had fallen into good hands, since Mrs. De Mora did not hold out for all sorts of lawyers to mix themselves up in his affairs, and he inwardly determined to settle a large sum on his future wife independently, in fact to make everything run upon wheels as much as he could.

"A thousand thanks, dear Mrs. De Mora," said this impatient young man promptly, "then I think we may consider it all settled, and you can rely upon my hurrying up the lawyers and getting married before I am many weeks older."

His relief was great now it was all over, and poor blind victim of the blind god he felt himself highly delighted with his success, and as soon as he conveniently could, bowed himself out of the drawing-room, after having thanked Mrs. De Mora as best he might in his nervous discomfort, and rejoined Juanita with whom he had arranged to go for a walk, in the course of which he meant to buy up half the jewellers' stock in trade in the whole of Brighton.

CHAPTER III.

REVELATIONS AT RIVERS'S.

The same evening that Jack had poured out the confidences of his love-sick soul into my attentive ear, I thought deeply over his hopeless case, and went to my club meaning to extract any information from any acquaintance whom I could find that had been to Homburg. Luckily for me I found, almost as soon as I entered the doors, a man whom I knew to be an old habitué of the gay German watering place, although I did not know if he had been there that season. No better man for my purpose could have turned up than Charley Markham, an intimate of an exalted member of the Royal family, and in that capacity obliged to be 'au courant' with everybody and everything. I knew that if he had been at Homburg that year no pretty woman would have escaped his notice, and the chances were he knew all about the De Moras. The first man to hear a story and the first to tell it, and very well too, to give him his due, was Charley Markham, so it would take but little diplomacy on my part to extract all about

them from him if he knew it. If nothing else had told me it was 'out of the season' the very fact of seeing Charley at his club, evidently rather at a loss for amusement, would have been sufficient proof. He who was the life and soul of nearly every dinner party, spoilt by every woman, and envied by most men, to be found standing by himself in front of his club fire, proved, to any one not just come back from an expedition to find Stanley in the heart of Africa, that there was nothing going on. He looked delighted to see any face he knew at such a slack time of year, and greeted me with a cordial:

"Hullo, Val, how do you come to be in town now? All the world is shooting or hunting unless there is some feminine attraction to keep them in London. I am glad you are here though for we can dine together, and by the way I have got a splendid story or two to tell you."

Nothing suited me better, so we adjourned to the dining-room and sat down to our food in good fellowship. Markham in a most talkative frame of mind, and in his best form, grew more and more communicative over his Perrier Jouet and my spirits too went up, knowing that before long I could turn his versatile brain to the topic I was but waiting for a convenient moment to broach. At last when dinner was nearly over my chance came, introduced by some allusion to his intimacy with some of the dwellers in high places, and I took my opportunity at once.

"By the way, Charley, were you at Homburg this year?"

"I should think so, it was the best season for years, and everybody was there. A quantity of pretty women, and any amount of picnics and dinners and tennis. I had very good fun I can tell you. There was such a dear little woman there, who shall be nameless, who made up to me to any amount, until a richer fellow chose to cast an envious eye on my luck, and I had to back out gracefully. She is quite good, don't you know, but just one of those dear little things one must make a friend of more or less."

"Rather more than less I don't doubt, my dear fellow, knowing your manners and customs with the fair sex. Haven't you got her photograph and put it up in your gallery of her sisters in the misfortune of admiring a gay deceiver like you?"

"You're jealous, Val, because no nice little thing like her ever admires you, and so you growl at luckier fellows like a bear with a sore ear," answers this sublimely self-contented being with a congratulatory smile over his own luck.

"Of course! it's quite natural I should be; and I should like to find the man who isn't, always supposing he has been favoured with a view of your gallery of past, present and to come. Now I think of it, do you know anything about a lady called Mrs. De Mora and her daughter who were at Homburg this year? I hear the girl is something quite out of the common in the way of looks, and if it's

true she isn't likely to have escaped your eagle eye."

I put this question quite as if it had not more than the interest of ordinary gossip, as I fondly hoped, so that no suspicion might be aroused in Charley Markham's mind, and his answer showed me that whatever he might indulge in in the way of curiosity, was in a wrong direction.

"Is that the way the wind lies?" laughed he, "are you desperately gone on the lovely Juanita too? You old sinner to have kept it so quiet. Where did you meet her, out with it at once, so that I can see how far it has gone, before I tell you all I know about them. And have you seen Mama? She's enough to warn one off the premises I can tell you, if ever a face said 'trespassers will be prosecuted' hers does."

I did not want to hurry over what he had to say on the subject as you may imagine, so I only said trying to look as much in love as I could under the circumstances, which were against me never having seen the lady, "There are very few men in the club to-night, and we shall have the smoking-room pretty well to ourselves, so let's go in there and talk it over."

I was much exercised in my mind already as to what Mrs. De Mora might be like, and it did not soothe me much to hear what Charley Markham gave out. I had already gathered, from the fact of Jack Darnley's unusual desire to fathom the intricacies of his future mother-in-law's antece-

dents, that there must be something odd about her. A man may enquire about the girl he is in love with, but it is seldom he shows any extreme curiosity about her mother, unless he is impecunious and wishes to make sure of a monetary prize in the matrimonial lottery. Jack was not open to this accusation, and therefore his anxiety must spring from another cause. I knew he was very much in love and therefore pretty blind to general occurrences, so there must have been something more than ordinary to awaken him to such energy, as he had shown in coming to me, to help him to discover what there might be amiss. We were very lucky and found no one whom we knew in the smoking-room, so we sat down by the fire at one end of the room and taking the excuse of lighting a rather refractory cigar, with a tendency to burn on one side to the detriment of its own flavour and my temper, I cudgelled my brain as to the best way to draw Markham. I did not want to admit that it was on behalf of Jack Darnley that I wanted information, and yet I was afraid, that if I let Charley Markham think that it was on my own account, he might be shy of saying as much as he knew, supposing it to be unfavourable in any way. As is often the case when a conversation has been interrupted there seemed no hurry on Markham's part to return to the subject of the De Moras, it appeared as if the train of his thoughts had wandered in another direction, and I hardly knew how to convert

them to the old channel without showing an indecent anxiety. The more anxious I was to know the less inclined I felt to show it, and I sat chafing inwardly whilst he launched out into many good stories of the ultra fashionable kind, that had won him his reputation of being one of the most amusing men in town, and the ornament of the set to which he belonged. However I manfully kept my patience watching for an opportunity to regain the old standpoint, knowing that the saying is a true one which declares that everything comes to him who can wait, and after hearing all the 'chroniques scabreuses' of the country houses he had been adorning with his presence for the last month or two, he gave me the long wished for chance.

"Norwich is going to make a big shooting tour this year, he was at Huntingford last week with me, and starts off in a few days, going to South America first and then on to the Rocky Mountains, I hear," said he at last coming geographically nearer my subject, "I was in two minds as to joining him, he wanted me awfully to go, but somehow I don't seem to care about it."

"At any rate you might go to show your friendship for me, and find out if the lucky man who marries the lovely Juanita will get a fortune. They are South Americans, I hear, and though that is a wide margin, some one or other might turn up to tell you how they are off for dollars, and I'll promise to pay so much per cent on her fortune,

and the cost of the cablegram, when I marry her." This was a very safe promise on my part if he had but known it, and not likely to take any money out of my pocket. It had the desired effect however of bringing the talk back to the De Moras, and by this means I scored again, and was in a fair way to learn what I wanted, thanks to a diplomacy which seems worthy of a better cause, for Markham's thoughts returned once more in the direction I had schemed for.

"Ah! I forgot you were on the fair enchantress's list of victims," he laughed, "by Jove, how you must have been languishing for news of her whilst I have been enlightening you on far less interesting subjects. After all there is not much to tell, and if you really are after the girl perhaps I ought not to say anything. It might put you off, don't you see, and as it's only hearsay and very little to be told from personal observation, I am not sure discretion isn't the better part of valour, at any rate as far as telling tales goes!"

My heart sank to think that after all my angelic patience I was to be robbed of my satisfaction, so I took my courage in both hands.

"No, but really, I want to know about them; not of course because I'm in love, for those are the last circumstances under which any man wants to enquire about the beloved object, having always such a high estimate of her charms and his own wisdom in selecting her, but because I have

heard a lot about them both and yet nothing definite, so if you can give me any reliable information, out with it like a good fellow." By this it was very evident my patience was on the wane and as Markham saw it too, he began.

"They were at Homburg and there wasn't a single man there, myself included of course, that didn't admire Juanita. She is one of the most lovely creatures you ever saw, Val, but I forgot of course you have seen her and very much too, I presume."

I held my tongue discreetly and waited for the rest, hoping that it would not be confined to rhapsodies about Juanita's beauty, as those I knew I must bear with sooner or later from Jack, and my wish now was to hear about her mother.

"They seem to have a lot of the ready if one can judge by appearances," he went on, "always well dressed, living in the best apartments in the place, dining well at the best restaurants and with all the outward evidences of a good balance at their bankers. Nobody seems to know who they are, or anything about them, and I must say, even if there really is all the money at the back of them that their way of living looks like, it would be just as well to find out something definite before you marry the girl, if you are really thinking of that. The mother is quite the most unfathomable mystery of a woman I ever saw, and it would take a bolder man than you to propose, until you

know something about the family, I should think. You see there is always a risk, when there are apparently no other members of a family, that when one marries the daughter of a lone woman, one may have to a certain degree to marry the mother too; or at any rate to have her a good bit in one's house, and for your sake I say Heaven forbid such a catastrophe."

"Do you know anything against her, Charley?" said I, "or is it only from the fact of knowing nothing that you suspect everything?"

"It is purely guesswork Val, but if you could but set eyes on that woman when no one is watching her, like I have when she was dining once alone with her daughter at a restaurant and didn't see me, you would come to the conclusion that she would not be an enviable addition to your family circle, as I did. I thought at first that it wouldn't be a bad spec to marry the girl; for some of these Americans are deuced rich you know, and I am not above such considerations as a fine fortune, combined with a lovely face, but by Jove the mother put me off. Nothing would induce me to propose, unless I could find out who they are, or something of their past.

I could not for the life of me help smiling at Markham's unmitigated faith in his own powers of fascination, he spoke as if he had only to ask to be accepted, and I firmly believe it never entered into his head that any woman

could resist him, a belief fostered in his brain a great deal by the silly behaviour of his lady friends: so much I give him credit for.

So this was all I could find out as yet, and very little it was, all told, but enough to make me determine to write to Jack at once and warn him not to be too rash; and let me try my luck again at digging up some of the past before he really committed the fatal deed.

It was getting late, and now I had accomplished my purpose I wanted to go back to my rooms, and sit and collect my ideas to write at once to Jack, so I suggested a brandy and soda and then bed to Markham, to both of which suggestions he responded. As we parted I casually remarked: "Do tell Norwich to see if he can find any one who knows them when he is in South America, and don't forget to tell me what he says."

As I walked home I speculated profoundly over the whole affair. How little I had been told and yet what an unconquerable misgiving I had for my poor friend's future. It is a very curious thing how some subjects, without really having any importance, may come by some instinctive feeling to have a grave effect on one's mind. Here was I, one of the most unimaginative men you could meet in a day's march, conjuring up as many fancies as an old maid, simply because I could not vouch for the birth, parentage and education of a young woman, who after all was

indifferent to me. I tried to argue with myself that no doubt it was all right, but try as I would an uncomfortable suspicion stuck in my mind as to its being really all wrong. What was the matter with me and how could I, a sensible man, write and ask Jack to wait an indefinite time because I had a presentiment of something wrong and wanted time to verify, or dispel, my suspicions. It was ridiculous and could I myself have waited, were I in love with a beautiful girl, whilst some one tried to hunt up some information which, when found, might only rob me of my peace of mind. Not I, had I to stand in Jack's shoes I know it would have made me marry all the quicker, so as to secure at any rate some of my happiness, come what might afterwards.

What then was the use of my writing to tell Jack that I knew absolutely nothing, but that what I had heard, had raised a horrid feeling of something wrong, only based upon the simple fact of knowing nothing. Of course he would laugh at me and tell me I was growing into an old woman, with all my presentiments for they were nothing more. Yet I felt I must write to him, and beg him to be patient for a few days and give him my reasons, such as they were. When I got home I sat down at my writing-table, and took up my pen hoping to find it easier to write when I had all the materials to hand and there was nothing to do but dip my pen in the ink.

Sometimes, when a letter has seemed almost impossible,

if once one gets pen in hand the difficulty fades, and wonder only remains why it was so much dreaded, so easily does it run off the pen. No such luck for me, and I sat there, turning over and over in my brain, how I should tell him that I could not hear anything definite and yet I knew something was wrong by intuition. No, I could not do it, and at last in despair chucked my pen into the waste paper basket just as if it had been its fault for not helping me, and went to bed to take sweet counsel with my pillow.

CHAPTER IV.

£ 40.000

Nature's great restorer has brought comfort to many in a worse plight than mine, and I have been told that even a criminal condemned to undergo the last penalty of the law will sometimes sleep soundly. I was not in such dire distress as this, and, therefore after a good spell of sleep I woke up feeling a new man, all the disinclination to write to Jack had vanished and I was no longer in difficulty as to what to say. Night had brought reflection and after all, he himself had told me to find out all I could and this justified me in imparting even the most trivial suspicion that might have arisen in my mind. Far from feeling disinclined to write as I had the night before, I was quite keen to begin my letter and rang at once for my servant to bring me my hot water. He came, bringing me as he always did, any letters that had come by the morning post. Amongst them was a letter from Jack and this was the first I opened. The contents of it made me jump straight out of my bed, and dress as quickly as

possible for a decently clothed Briton who has to appear in the streets of London. It informed me, in very few words of what had passed and how he had made up his plans, adding that he was coming to London to see his lawyers, going to make his settlements and be married as soon as he could. Here was a comforting announcement to a man, who had but a few hours ago had every sort of apprehension and found that all his trouble was in vain. I saw by the clock that he would be in town in a very short time, and, as he said in his letter that he was going at once to his lawyers, and afterwards would come and tell me all he had arranged, appointing an early hour to lunch at the club to enable him to return to Brighton in the afternoon. I knew then, that if I would see him before he had done some very rash action, I must try to find him at once. I knew his lawyer's address and meant to go there directly, and try and persuade him at least to wait a bit before he gave his instructions. I rang for my servant, and told him to look at the time of arrival for the morning trains from Brighton whilst I dressed, for I am not very early in the morning, it was already 10 o'clock. The man knocked at the door and told me that there were trains arriving at 9.55, and 10.42 and 11.5. I was somewhat comforted hoping that even the anxiety of a lover would not have drawn Jack from his bed in time to reach town before 11. I had to drive to Lincoln's Inn

and so thought I would not wait to eat anything in case his restless spirit might have made him take the earlier train. It was barely 20 minutes past 10 when I jumped into a hansom and drove off, giving the address of Jack's lawyers. When once I was in the cab, and had time to think, I began to be aware that some of my difficulties were reappearing. What in the name of fortune was I to say to Jack to persuade him to a little patience? If I had to be face to face with him it would be even worse than a letter, and of course he would laugh at my slightly grounded fears for his future. He had evidently fallen still more a victim to Juanita than ever, and how could I expect him to pay any attention to me and my words of wisdom, however wise they might be, they would fall flat after the enchanted tones of his enslaver. After all perhaps when I saw him the words would come, and it was no use thinking only to arrive at no definite result, so I reached the end of my journey just as wise as I was at the beginning, which is not saying much, and jumped out of my cab and rang the bell and enquired of the man who answered it, if Mr. Darnley was not expected there and if I could see him when he arrived.

The man looked at me in astonishment and replied, "Mr. Darnley is here, sir, he is with Mr. Fenton, so I am afraid you cannot see him, but if it is anything very important I can take in your card if you will give it me.

Please walk into the waiting room, sir, and I will bring you the answer there."

I took out my card in a semi-unconscious way, so astonished was I to find that Darnley was before me, and I was infinitely relieved when the clerk shut the door quietly behind him upon me, and I found myself in a little, dim back room with the newspapers on a round table, one or two uncompromising chairs, and some cards setting forth the terms of various life insurance companies for my sole companions. My first thought was truly characteristic. "By Jove, Jack must be desperately bad he got up and took the early train!" I still had a faint hope that he would come and speak to me and that I might have time to give him one word of warning. In a few minutes the clerk came back, and handed me a card of Jack's with these lines pencilled hurriedly upon it. "Wait for me, I have all but done and will join you." Had I been a man given to indulgence in useless expletives I should have said "Damn" at this moment with no doubt a great deal of ensuing relief and comfort to myself, and greatly to my credit I think it is, that I was able to contain myself and say to the man, who stood waiting as if there might be some answer to the message: "Thank you that is all. I will wait here till Mr. Darnley joins me." I was furious with myself for not having written or telegraphed the night before and was quite ready to hurl every sort

of opprobious epithet at Jack's head for being such an utter fool. I felt certain he had been giving some rash instructions to his man of business, and nothing short of manslaughter would make him countermand them, of this I was equally certain. A pretty fool he had made of me, setting me a herculean task and not giving me a single day to do it in. Did the idiot think I was a thought reader or any supernaturally gifted person, connected more or less with the black arts, to find out the past and the future in a few hours. In short I was working myself up into a righteous indignation with him when the door opened and there stood the object of my wrath, with his jolly face beaming, as if he had done something abnormally clever and amusing.

"This is good of you, Val, to meet me here, now I can tell you all about it in the cab as we go back. Like that I shall have time to go to a jeweller's before lunch and get back by an early train."

"Jack," said I angrily, "are you gone staring mad to rush up to town at this hour? What devil's own mischief have you been up to?

"Oh, I see, you lazy beggar," laughed he, "you think I must be off my head to get out of bed an hour sooner than usual. What's the matter with you, you look as black as my hat."

"So would you if I'd made as big a fool of you as you

have of me. You seem to have forgotten what you asked me to do the other night, and before I have had the time to open my eyes you fire off a letter telling me you are coming up to London, to make your settlements, and then get married off hand."

"Val, when you see her you will sympathise with what you now think is unseemly haste on my part. I know I asked you to find out all you could about Mrs. De Mora, but I never pledged myself to wait till you had done it, and what does it matter after all, if the worst comes to the worst, I can but give her enough money to keep away from England, and, as there is no reasonable ground to think she is of the criminal class, the rest does not make any odds to me so long as I get Juanita."

"You don't know that she does not belong to that portion of the community which you name, Jack, and you'll be in a pretty mess if you suddenly find out that this mysterious lady, for even *you* own she is a dark horse, has something in her past life disgraceful to the family of an English gentleman of good connections and fortune."

"Val," said Jack laughing, "what is the good of imagining all sorts of horrors. It's no use meeting misfortunes half way and there is nothing to start you croaking like an ill omened bird. Do as I do, and look on the bright side of things, it always pays best in the end."

I felt anything but inclined to do this but Jack's good

temper certainly was contagious and I could not go on quarrelling with him, for it was his own affair after all, so I said, "Well, it's no use talking of what might or might not have been. Tell me what you have done and I will tell you my story."

Of course he was ready to begin, and with the usual egotism of a very happy person nothing was better worth talking about than himself. This species of selfishness is one of the most touching things about a real happiness; the person who experiences it wants the whole world to share his joy, and again, it is one of the most aggravating forms of egotism, for who is broad minded enough fo feel full of peace and good will towards the world because they see a fellow creature thoroughly content? I believe every man feels more or less sore that such an overflowing cup has not been lifted to his lips, instead of his neighbour's. Let him be patient, for in the constant turning of Fortune's wheel he may come to his slice of luck.

Jack told me of his interview with Juanita and her mother and disclosed his views, upon the subject of marriage settlements in general, in the following oracular manner.

"You know, Val, life is short and I don't see why I need wait; and so I came up at once to settle all the tiresome law business. I asked no questions of Mrs. De Mora as to their money matters, because it doesn't make any difference to me if Juanita has any money or not. I

can so well afford to give an ample independence to the woman I marry and yet provide for any children, which in the ordinary course of things, I may expect to have. I have told Fenton to settle a sum of £40,000 upon Juanita independently, and the day she becomes my wife that sum will be hers as absolutely as I can make it."

It was no use saying what was uppermost in my mind, which was uncomplimentary to Jack's understanding, so I contented myself with asking him what his lawyer said to this proposal.

"Of course Fenton said he hardly knew how to arrange such a thing, and that it was usual for all marriage settlements to be more or less in the same form; that the income of a sum could be settled independently, but that it was unheard of to make the principal subject to no condition. He held up all sorts of threats over my head of how the money might be alienated from my heirs and property for ever by such a course, and wanted actually to suggest that supposing I died before her, Juanita could marry again and provide for a second family out of my money to the detriment of my lawful heirs, and their estate. Rather early days to talk about that, isn't it, Val?"

"I suppose that you are not in a frame of mind capable of listening to such reasonable advice just now, Jack," said I grimly, "but at any rate I suppose you have done nothing as yet."

"Indeed, I have," says this exasperatingly headstrong individual, "I told Fenton not to bother his head about it, and to make the usual kind of settlements without complications, and in addition to this I wished him to draw up a deed of gift which I could sign and present to Juanita on our wedding day. Isn't that a good idea?" Much better than having all sorts of impossible legal deeds to sign, which take ages, and are often not what you want when they are done."

"Have you asked Mrs. De Mora at all about any money she may have to settle on her daughter," said I, "or is this only a mad notion of your own?" I could not help suspecting that he had sounded the elder lady on the subject, and by some chance, come to the conclusion that she was disinclined to sink any of her capital in settlements; and that he, in his generous manner, determined that he would not insist. Indeed it might have been that he feared having to provide a home for Mrs. De Mora unless he made the way smooth for her daughter's feet.

"I know nothing," he said hurriedly, "except that, as they are foreigners, they have no lawyers in England and I think it so much the better that they have not, also, Mrs. De Mora threw herself and her daughter so entirely on my generosity that I feel all the more bound to provide handsomely for her." I saw that it was no use pressing him further and all I could do was to hope that there was

nothing for which he would have to repent at leisure. There was a certain bitterness however in my tone, I am afraid, as I said, "Of course no one has the right to find fault with you for doing as you like with your own, and one can only hope you mayn't have cause to regret it."

There was a short pause after this, as I felt it was impossible for me to say any more, and if Jack wanted a further insight into my feelings on the matter he must ask for it. In a few minutes he began to talk again, this time asking me as to my future plans and such indifferent matters, but as his thoughts evidently could not wander far, in any direction away from his own future arrangements, he concluded his sentence with:

"Did you by any chance hear anything about Mrs. De Mora, you said you had a story to tell; was it about her?"

"Not exactly," I answered, "but I met Charley Markham at the Club last night and he was at Homburg this season, you know, so I asked him if he knew anything of them. He hadn't much to say beyond that the daughter was very pretty and the mother mysterious, neither of which pieces of information are news to you, I suppose."

"But he didn't know anything against her, of course it isn't likely he would," said Jack triumphantly, "So that is the result of your enquiries, is it, Val, and even you must own that it's not very likely South Americans should be very well known to any English people."

"That may cut both ways unfortunately, Jack, not that I mean it to prove that, because nothing good is known it follows there is bad to be feared, but still it might be, and I would rather have heard you say Mrs. De Mora had taken you into her confidence, now you have really settled to marry her daughter so soon."

"Perhaps I would too," said he reflectively, "but as I can't force her to speak it must remain as it is."

By this time we had arrived in the habitable portions of the town, by which I mean club land. I left Jack to go to the jeweller's by himself, settling to meet him at the Club at luncheon time which, to enable him to leave by an early train, and to suit my empty stomach, (for I had left in the morning without waiting for breakfast,) was fixed for one o'clock. After I left him I had time to look through the letters I had received that morning, but which owing to the hurried way I went off to Lincoln's Inn, I had put in my pocket unopened. Amongst others I found one from my sister, whom by the way I have not yet mentioned. I must however devote myself just now to Jack's affairs until he returned to Brighton, as it is better to keep to the order in which the events fell out, and after I have described how the remainder of the morning was spent, I may then digress far enough to explain a little of my own connection with the story. I met Jack according to agreement at the Club at one o'clock, as hungry

as the proverbial hunter, and was surprised to see the face that had, a little more than half an hour ago, been radiant with content with things in general, and himself in particular, looking half a yard long with as discontented an expression as one could find in the whole of London. "Hullo, old boy," was my greeting, "talk about my looking as black as your hat, as you did to me this morning! Why you look as if you had dropped a tenner and picked up a sovereign, what is it all about?"

"I have just met Charley Markham, Val, who told me a good deal of what he said to you last night, and I can tell you I don't feel best pleased at it. The brute spoke as if he had had a serious flirtation with Juanita and only spared her, what he considers the honour of asking her to marry him, because he could not trace her mother's career; chapter and verse. Infernal cheek, I call it, and he told me he had commissioned Norwich, who is going out to South America, to find out all about Mrs. De Mora's antecedents, before he made up his mind whether the daughter would suit him."

I could not for the life of me help laughing and the more visible my amusement became, the more indignant grew Jack, at last by way of calming his wounded feelings, I said:

"You need not be jealous of him, my dear fellow, he isn't in the hunt at all with you. If mama is shady she

wouldn't lose the chance of a rich son-in-law, and if she isn't, she is a woman, I suppose, and will prefer you, and your broad acres and banking account, to Charley with a competence and little else."

Strange to say my remark did not have the desired effect and he only retorted savagely.

"Of course you're like all the rest of them and think nothing enters into it but money. I tell you what, Val, will you come down with me to Brighton to-day, and I will introduce you to them both, and you shall see how sweet and lovely Juanita is, and judge for yourself about Mrs. De Mora. The train goes at 2.30. you have plenty of time to put what you want in a portemanteau and come with me."

"I can't come to-day, Jack, I am really sorry as I want to see your future wife, but I have a letter from home in my pocket and they want to have me there to-morrow, but I will come down, if you'll let me, after I have been there."

I meant what I said, and Jack and I parted, he to return to Brighton and I to go back and get everything ready to start for the country the next day.

CHAPTER V.

A MODERN CASSANDRA.

As I have not inflicted the reader hitherto with any detail as to myself and my belongings, I think I am entitled to his patience for a few moments, whilst I explain how things were with me at the time of which I write. How I wish they were now as then, but time changes all things, and, since I am now recording events which happened some thirty years ago, it is but natural that some of those concerned in the drama then, should have joined the great majority now. However let me go back to those happy old days and write of them as if they still were in the present; and who shall say that there may not be some pleasure in recalling the days of one's youth, tinged with regret though they may be; for, so long as one dare live by recollection, the past has not left one utterly forlorn.

Brantingford, where I was born, is a square solid house built in an unimposing, but most comfortable fashion, of that most suitable of all materials to our not too cheerful climate, red brick. It stands in the midst of a small park with

close round the outskirts of it (or rather forming the outer portion of it) woods of some extent; through which go many paths, some wide enough for two or three horses abreast, and some just letting a pair of lovers, with arms entwined, pass along. Here it was that Jack and I have spent many a long summer holiday, never tired of the woods with their endless changes of shade and sunlight, and the varieties of fur and feather to be found beneath their shelter. Everything found favour in our eyes that led us to the woods, from the long hours spent in sneaking about from glade to glade in the cool grey evening, on the chance of finding a wily bunny out for his evening's meal, and by reason of his greediness an easier prey to the rabbit rifles we carried; to the time when the cub hunting began, and we raced about on our ponies in the clear morning air, with all the dewy gossamer threads floating from branch to branch and grass-blade to grass-blade, leaving dewy lines on the ponies, legs, and our caps and jackets. We were much in the way no doubt on such occasions as these latter, but with the sublime indifference of youth to such trifles, we continued to amuse ourselves, and derived endless diversion from such small incidents as galloping over a bumpy grass-field on a short legged pony, to try and head a more than usually venturesome cub; (which we had about as much chance of overtaking as if we had been on foot) and hallooing when we viewed poor Reynard. Jack, of course,

spent most holidays with us, for he was an orphan, and his estate lay close to that of my father who was his guardian, having been an old friend of his uncle, from whom he had inherited the estate at Knole Court as it was called. His mother died when he was about thirteen, during his first half at Eton, and from that time he became almost as much at home at Brantingford as I was. We, that is we Trenthams; consisted of my father, his one sister who had remained unmarried and my only sister Geraldine, who was seven years my junior, and whom we both of us as boys, that is Jack and I, were devoted to; and dragged into as many of our amusements as we could. She was, much to the horror of her nurses and governesses, nearly as good with the gun or rabbit rifle as we, and as good a rider across any country negotiable for a small pony, as either of us. She was two years younger than Jack and he settled definitely, at the age of thirteen, that he and Gerry, as my sister was always called, should be married when they grew up. I was five years older than Jack, and I confess that what he planned as a boy, I had always in my own mind hoped would come to pass, and so I felt, in addition to my fears for the wisdom of Jack's maturer choice, the pangs of disappointment at my own wishes remaining unrealized. It was from my sister that I had received a letter that morning, telling me that my father had told her to write, and beg me to come to Brantingford for a little while, to have some

hunting. There were to be one or two balls in the neighbourhood, one of them the Hunt Ball, and he had invited a house full of people for a fortnight's hunting and dancing, and wanted me to be there. She informed me who her party was to include, and most of them I knew and liked, and she asked me to mention any one whom I would like invited, as they wanted three more to complete the house full. She said that my father wanted Jack to be of the party, but, as he did not know his address at the moment, told me to invite him and suggest two more nice people, for a jolly party, if I could. This had started the idea in my head that I might suggest that Mrs. De Mora and her daughter might be asked at the same time as Jack, as by this means one might judge for oneself something about the people with whom he was contemplating casting in his lot. I therefore determined to go down at once to Brantingford and tell my father, who was almost as fond of Jack as he was of his own son, how matters stood, and in fact make a clean breast of the whole thing. I knew him to be a clear sighted man and had every reason to rely upon his judgment: and it might have a good result if he was able to draw any conclusion as to the fitness of the match; and, if he found anything suspicious, to add his friendly warnings to mine. No sooner was this settled in my own mind than I sat down and wrote, first to my father telling him to expect me on the following day, and then a

letter to Jack, telling him of my plans, and asking his permission to tell my father of his matrimonial projects. As this letter consisted of matter that is hardly able to be told without giving it in full I must transcribe it, and Jack's answer, much as I object generally to giving any correspondence, which is in most cases uninteresting (except to the writer or recipient). However as it would be difficult to explain well without showing the contents of the letter itself, I will give it without further comment.

"Dear Jack, I am going to-morrow to Brantingford, where the Governor has arranged a house-party for the Hunt Ball, and one o. two other festivities, including a few days hunting, and wants me to invite you to come down. He also asks me to suggest a couple of other people to make up the house full. Now it has struck me that if you don't mind my telling them how you have engaged yourself to Miss De Mora (and if the wedding is to be so soon you can't keep it to yourself much longer) I might tell them to ask both Miss De Mora and her mother to come to Brantingford. Does this plan suit you? You seemed anxious for me to make their acquaintance, and can you think of a better plan? If you fall in with the idea send me a telegram as soon as you get this letter in the morning, saying yes or no, and I will sound the Governor as soon as I arrive, and if he will arrange it Aunt Dorothy shall write an invitation at once to Mrs. De Mora; and,

you can explain to her that your friendship with my family has been of such long standing, that you would like to introduce your future wife, then beg her to accept, and the thing is settled. I shall be very glad myself if you do make it suit you, as I am very anxious to see the fair lady, and not less interested in her mother, though for different reasons. How astonished they all will be at Brantingford when they hear the news. I leave to-morrow by the 2.15, so wire early. Yours ever

Valentine Trentham.

This letter I knew would arrive early in the morning, and I might expect my answer in plenty of time before I left London. The answer turned up, according to my expectations, at a little after 11 the next morning, and was in these words. "Trentham, 71 St. James's Place, Say what you like. Excellent plan. Awaiting letter from Brantingford. Darnley." Armed with this I went down by the 2.15. train, and found myself at my destination at half past four. As I got out of the train I saw Gerry looking up and down the platform, evïdently waiting for me. A fresher more healthy picture of an English girl one could not have set eyes upon, in a neatly cut tweed dress with a coat with fur cuffs and collar, and her bright face fresh from the cool air, she was, if not strictly beautiful, yet such a woman as any man might be proud of. Her

rich brown hair, thick and wavy in front, was drawn neatly up beneath her hat, and her eyes of that dark soft brown which usually goes to match such coloured hair, shone with pleasure, and her whole face seemed to be lighted up with their brightness. Her mouth was rather large, but gave such an expression of frank good nature to her face that it was an additional charm in most people's eyes. Such was my sister at twenty-two; but little altered, and that all for the better, since she was a little child, and our almost constant companion in all that it was possible for a girl to share of our holiday amusements. She still had a liking for standing by me if we went to shoot some pheasants in the coverts, for as ours was a hunting country we did not preserve very strictly, and would shoot at times with my gun, and she rode well to hounds and was as fond as ever of it. No one who knew her however could stigmatise her as 'fast', for she did all she did from genuine love of the sport, and with none of the hideous hoydenishness of the usual fast girl, who generally makes any pursuit of the kind either a cloak for attracting men, or, to show independence of the world and its opinion. As soon as she caught sight of me she came up, and was not the least ashamed to give me a good sisterly kiss although, as we bear no resemblance to each other, her action might have been open to misconstruction with the bystanders; and she was

too honestly delighted to see me to hide her feelings.

"Val, my dear boy, it is nice to see you, and so soon too. Let us put your traps in the dog cart at once and get home as quickly as we can. Have you got more than will go in the cart? If so we had better not wait for it and send down the luggage cart afterwards."

"I like the notion you have of how much luggage a man ought to travel with, Gerry, you who always go about with a regular Noah's ark. But we will take my gun and my bag, and the rest we will send for."

We got into the dog-cart and were soon making the best of our way to the house. As the drive only took about twenty minutes we had not much time for talking, and, beyond Gerry asking me a few questions as to what I had been doing, and answering a few of mine as to the hunting and the neighbours and the party invited for the following week, nothing passed.

The door opened as we drove up and a warm light shone through it of mingled fire and gas, and in fine relief stood the portly figure of Davis, the old butler, whom I had remembered since my childhood, and who up to the day of his death could with the greatest difficulty call me anything but 'Master Valentine'. There is something so unutterably delightful in coming back to one's home and finding a welcome from each person one meets. I do not care how much a man wanders; or how much his tastes

lead him to journeyings in far lands, and visits to the tents of Shem, either in a friendly way or in the spirit of enquiry, he cannot fail to be subject to the soothing influence of his home when he reenters it, or, if by reason of his lack of affection he does not feel the warm expansion of the heart to which I allude, I am heartily sorry for him, he misses one of the most thoroughly satisfactory of all joys, and had better make up his mind to a lonely old age, and contemplate no nearer ties than are obligatory in a bachelor existence, for he cannot make a happy husband or father. I own to a very distinct and appreciable softening of the heart towards all the old familiar faces, places, and things, amongst which I grew from childhood to manhood: and it was with a sincere glow of pleasure that I stepped over the threshold of my home. The fire itself seemed to burn more brightly and throw out a more genial warmth here than elsewhere; and the old oak panelled hall gave an aspect of homely English comfort, most enticing to a man who had just come from bachelor chambers in London. I had only time to hand my coat and hat to Davis before my father opened the door of his room, devoted entirely to himself and his pipes, guns and whips, and called to me in the old genial tone that took me back most vividly to my boyhood, when on coming from Eton for my holidays he had greeted me with almost the same words: "So there you are, Val, well, I am glad to see you, my boy, what

have you done with yourself since I saw you, come in here and tell me all the news." If ever there was a man who looked a welcome it was my father and his whole face spoke more than a thousand words could have done as he held out his hand, and then turning to Gerry said:

"Go and tell Aunt Dorothy Val has come and will join you in the drawing room. Will you have tea with them or a glass of sherry with me after your drive, Val?"

"I will go and say how do you do to Aunt Dorothy first, Father; there is such a lot to talk over with you that I think we had better put it off till after dinner over our cigars."

"Yes, that's better perhaps, so go to the drawing-room now. Gerry and your aunt have been fidgetting to see you all day, one would think you had been away years instead of 6 months, so go and show yourself and they will see that your shadow hasn't grown less in your absence."

How cheery his genial face looked and how hearty his laugh sounded: and as I left his room to go to the drawing-room, I felt the sensation of comfort and enjoyment redoubled, in the assurance of the affection that I found always the same, from one and all, in my old home. As I went through the hall with the fires burning in the wide chimneys, for it was big enough to have one at each end, the warmth went into my veins; and in the pleasant light from the burning wood and the shaded lamps, the dark faces of my ancestors looked out of the pictures hanging on the oak panelling, and

seemed to smile down an extra welcome. When I opened the drawing-room door I saw the fresh face of my sister and her neat figure, as she leaned over her little terrier, whom she was inducing to sit up by holding a fragrant and succulent morsel of hot buttered toast above his nose. My aunt sat with her back to me, and the lamplight shone on her white hair as she leant on the tea table watching the performance, and the whole scene was so pleasing to me after my six months of absence, that the thought crossed my mind how lucky Jack was if he was going to marry, and set up a home of his own, and I hoped all might be as bright and warm and comfortable as this was. So engrossed were both Gerry and my aunt that they had not heard the door open, my footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet and both of them were startled when I spoke.

"Aunt Dorothy, is Trip to have all the attention and toast or will you spare a little for me?"

In one moment she was kissing me. "Val, my dear, you startled me so, but how well you look; and it is so nice to see you that I can't be angry, although you did make me jump so. I am not so young as I was and my nerves are not so strong, now sit down and have some tea and tell us all your news."

Then of course I had to tell them all I could remember of what I had seen and done; sometimes I have no doubt drawing slightly on my imagination when memory failed,

and at others drawing a veil over some incidents which I did not care to describe. I think it is always like that one tells the story of one's doings and, however honestly one may try to recall them, it is always with reservations and additions of which one is more or less conscious, putting a rose coloured light where it ought to be, even if wanting really at the time of the action, and softening and shading off at others, where it seems necessary. In my own mind I am uncertain if this is only the artistic perception of the raconteur, or inherent untruthfulness of the average mind, but of one thing I am sure; and that is, that I am not the only person who supplies such embellishments, and yet supposes himself to be uttering the plain unvarnished truth. Who would not be astonished to hear the version of his tale told by another, and then contrast it with the impression left on his own mind. My chief anxiety all the time I was talking to my aunt and sister, however, was to hear about the party for the next week and to see if my idea of asking Jack and the De Moras was a feasible one, as I was not only anxious to see them myself, but I felt that two pair of keen feminine eyes might even discover more than my own, and the result of their observations it would interest me to know. At last having come to the end of my tether I thought it was about time to put a few questions to them. I had carefully abstained so far from telling them of Jack's engagement, having talked entirely about myself: mostly answering their

questions which had been confined to me, and my affairs.

"By the way, Aunt Dorothy, have you heard the news about Jack Darnley, very likely you have not though, now I think of it, as it's only a few days old, guess the most unlikely thing you can think of." I had no intention of admitting that I had any doubts as to the match being all right, or allowing my aunt and sister to discover I had even the most shadowy distrust of the De Moras. I wanted an unbiassed opinion from them when they saw the lady and her daughter, and this I could never get should they find out that I was not inclined to like what I had heard of them. This I meant to keep to tell my father, and thresh the whole matter out with him, and I flattered myself that the way I had chosen to reveal it to my aunt and sister, was most diplomatic.

Gerry however was too sharp for me "Of course I guess, Val, he's going to be married. How funny you did not say so when you wrote, is there anything wrong, isn't the girl nice?"

It almost took my breath away, what could have made Gerry jump to such a conclusion, and so near the truth too, and after all my trouble in treating it as a good joke. I was intensely relieved when Aunt Dorothy broke in upon my sister's questions, as it gave me time to collect my thoughts as to how to answer, without showing any signs of the astonishment I felt.

"Nonsense, Gerry," interrupted aunt Dorothy, "it can't be that, Jack's quite a boy still. What is it, Val?"

"Gerry's right, aunt," said I now I had got over my first surprise, "I haven't seen the young lady myself, but I am told she is lovely and most fascinating, and I hope to make her acquaintance soon."

"Who is she, Val, does Father know it yet?" questioned Gerry impatiently. It seemed almost as if this unfortunately clear-sighted sister of mine had seen in my face what I wanted to hide, and guessed that I was not best pleased at the news myself, but I was determined not to own to it.

"Don't be in such a hurry with all your questions, Gerry. Hang it, you must give a fellow time. Of course Father doesn't know it yet, I came straight in here to see you. We will tell him at dinner. The young lady's name is Miss Juanita De Mora, and she is a South American by birth, of a Spanish family, and now you are as wise as I am myself."

"Is that really all you know, Val? Why couldn't Jack have married some nice English girl, I wonder, that every one could know about.

"I agree with Gerry, Val," remarked aunt Dorothy, "it would have been nicer if he had chosen an English wife, but no doubt she is charming. Where did they meet each other?"

I was glad to be asked a question at last that I could answer without any attempt at deception, and said at once.

"They were staying at the Grahams, at Basingfield, when

Jack was there, she, and her mother with her, and it seems to have been almost a case of love at first sight on Jack's part. That was in September, I believe, but they only became engaged two or three days ago, I think, formally at any rate, whatever private understanding they may have come to, between themselves, before. Jack told me himself of it a week or so ago, and asked me to go down to Brighton with him to make their acquaintance, as they are staying there now. When I got Gerry's letter the day before yesterday, telling me about the party here next week, I thought that as you wanted me to suggest one or two more people to fill up, we might perhaps ask Jack to come and his fiancée and her mother. What do you think of my plan, aunt Dorothy?" It was with some misgivings as to how my suggestion would be received that I spoke, but after all it was just as well to take the bull by the horns, and very little would be gained by beating about the bush. After a short pause, during which I thought of the most likely objections to be made, and of the best way to meet them should they arise, my aunt said:

"Well, we must see what your father says, Val. Of course as Jack is almost one of the family we should all very naturally like to make the acquaintance of his future wife, but we don't know the lady; and, it may not be agreeable to her mother to accept an invitation for her to a stranger's house. We can ask your father, and if he thinks it can be managed, we might

write to Mrs. De Mora, I think you said her name was, which at any rate can do no harm even if she does not accept."

"It seems a very good idea, aunt Dorothy, we might tell my father about it at dinner. He will be quite as much astonished as you to hear of Jack's engagement, as I had no time to tell him just now."

During this conversation my sister had not made any remark, but she had evidently been listening with great interest and looking attentively at me, as if to gather more from my face than she could from my words. I had been uncomfortably aware of this the whole time, and felt that when the opportunity offered, she would be sure to ask me some further questions as her expression was not one of unmixed satisfaction. I half feared that as she knew my face so well her quick perception might have detected some of the feelings which had actuated me, and of which, try as I might, I now began to feel I had not been able to conceal all traces.

I was not far wrong as it turned out, but as forewarned is to a certain extent forearmed, I did not intend to show any disinclination to answer any questions she put, or her suspicions might be really aroused; as it was they could not amount to more than a vague idea that there was some uncertainty in my mind. It was not any surprise to me then when she said, "Now, Val, come and talk to me and tell me what you think of this engagement of

Jack's. I don't believe you are one bit pleased about it, and somehow I think you are anxious in some way or another. What is it?"

"Upon my word, Gerry, what a vivid imagination you have. I told you I knew nothing more than I said," was my answer given in the most unconcerned tone I could command, "what should I be anxious about? I might be if I were Jack, it's enough to make any fellow feel in a fright to think he is going to tie himself up for life to anything so uncertain as a woman."

"Do be serious, Val and tell me really what you know, the more you talk the more I feel sure you are trying to make the best of a bad bargain. I only hope Father will let us ask her here, and we can see for ourselves what sort of girl she is."

"Don't count your chickens before they are hatched; even if they are asked they may not come, and how will you judge for yourself then, Gerry?"

"I shall feel certain then that there must be some reason that makes them wish to keep out of sight until they have finally secured their prize," said Gerry oracularly.

Although I might in my own mind feel somewhat of the same thing myself, yet I could not help laughing.

"What in the name of fortune makes you, a most nineteenth century girl, become a Cassandra?"

"Don't be such a blind bat, Val, can't you open your

eyes to the fact of there being something sufficient to raise the question in the mere knowledge of your having been told of this engagement, and yet, when we wrote to ask you to tell us Jack's address so that we might ask him for next week, not one word do you say, and when you come down out comes the news in the most unexpected way. If there is nothing funny in it why could it not have been told at once?"

"Who has been teaching you logic since I was here last, Gerry? I can't argue the point, but you must allow that it is quite natural that I should like to keep the news until I saw you all."

"I won't allow even that, Val, but, as it is very evident you either can't or won't tell me if there is anything the matter, I won't ask any more questions, but if the De Moras come I shall know if I am right or not, and put two and two together."

"I have heard that sometimes a popular error creeps into this kind of calculation, Gerry, which gives the result of the sum as five, don't be led to any such wrong conclusion yourself."

"Don't laugh, Val, leave that to those who win. Now let's talk of something else."

To my relief the conversation took another turn and the subject of Jack and his fiancée was dropped. As my sister and I had always been very fond of each other,

and companions always whenever possible, we found plenty to say to each other, and the time slipped by very pleasantly until the time came for us all to go to dress for dinner. When I got to my room my thoughts were directed mostly to the knotty point of how to compass an invitation for the De Moras for the ensuing week. I felt that things were certainly not being made easier for me by Gerry's uncomfortably sudden intuition, which led to her having hit upon the very same uneasy train of conjecture as I had myself, and the whole thing became the more difficult for me every moment. I hoped however that my sister would be wise enough not to express any of her doubts before my father, from the feeling of curiosity that I knew her to have, to see the De Moras and judge for herself as to their eligibility. I felt pretty sure she would conceal her feelings for fear of imbuing my father with any suspicion which might lead to his not allowing an invitation to be sent them. I confess that, with the natural distaste of a man to any unpleasant office, I felt an unconquerable desire to leave the whole matter undiscussed and trust to chance. My nature was thouroughly indolent and it was unutterably irksome to me to be involved in what troubled me, as this semi-detective business about the De Moras did, and also, as is common to lazy people, I had an eternal spring of hope in my bosom which led me to trust that things might turn out well. Subsequent experience

has taught that, what I then took to be a great faith in human nature, and the general tendency towards good in most events, was only a sign of my own disinclination to interfere; and the invincible laziness of a nature that prefers to take things as they come, to putting a shoulder to the wheel, where such energy is not absolutely forced upon it.

Anyhow the whole matter was most undisputedly a nuisance and seemed to upset my usual comfortable serenity: and even the very tying of my white tie suffered, and my thoughts disturbed me so, that it took me nearly as long to dress as if I had been a young woman going to her first ball. I sauntered down to dinner thoroughly bored and out of sorts, but more because I felt that having gone so far I was bound to carry the matter through, than because I feared anything bad for Jack's future, for I had argued myself into a frame of mind when I could almost laugh at my suspicions and I meant, as soon as I saw my aunt and sister well off to bed, to talk to my father over our cigars, feeling sure he would laugh over the affair and see nothing but a simple act of headstrong folly in Jack's engagement.

CHAPTER VI.

INVITATION.

How warm and cheerful the drawing-room looked as I went in. and the fire drew out the delicate scent of the flowers in the vases on the table: it was with a delicious sense of comfort that I buried myself in a big armchair, close to a shaded reading-lamp, to await the appearance of my aunt and sister and the announcement of dinner. I took up the Morning Post and threw it down again impatiently because my eye happened to rest first upon the advertisement of a detective agency, which brought the old vexed question before me that I had determined to put away, anyhow till I spoke to my father, but, do as I would the subject reverted again and again, so finally I gave myself up to idleness, and if the door had not opened for the ladies and the announcement of the dinner almost immediately, I think I should have found peace in a nap. I offered my arm to Aunt Dorothy, and Gerry following, we went to the dining-room, meeting my father, who had not put in an appearance in the

drawing-room, just coming from his study. I did not feel cheerful as I walked in I am bound to confess, but a good dinner and a glass or two of wine make all the difference to any one who is not Diogenes, and has chosen a tub of his own free will for a residence, and by degrees my spirits rose, a feeling of genial comfort crept over me, and I was almost inclined to extend peace and good will to all the world and his wife, and even Jack's future mother-in-law included. How refined and homely it all was and how the shaded candles shone on the silver, polished by the careful hand of old Davis till it had the almost blue depth of a mirror, and reflected the flowers and the pink shades. There was a sense of quiet luxury about it all, that appealed to me intensely just fresh from the London life, where, luxurious as one's Club may be, there is nothing like the quiet comfort of such a home as this of mine. Old Davis and his subordinates, whose steps were muffled by the thick carpet, were not so quick perhaps as the waiters at Rivers's, but they were attentive to me only, and the plate, although it might be less sumptuous, was as well cleaned and bore my own crest. The cook perhaps was not such a chef as one finds in a Club, nor was there a varied and choice menu to choose from, but it was all cooked to perfection and I felt in my heart that everyone was doing their best because the 'young squire' had come down. I should have been more than

human had not my savage breast been soothed by such comforts as these, especially when accompanied by the grateful incense of homage to myself, such as I could not fail to observe in many small ways. Of course the 'woman kind' were undisguised in their delight and openly consulted me, ostentatiously showing how much they thought of me and my wishes, but even my dear old father seemed to be hardly able to conceal his pleasure, and ordered his best wine and seemed in his best mood. So much the nicer, and no time could have been better for me to ask a favour of him, and all my doubts and misgivings seemed to have faded into thin air. The conversation drifted along easily from one thing to another, most of the subjects being county matters and other things of interest only to ourselves, at last a break came which I took advantage of.

"Now, father, I must tell you a piece of news that I have already startled Gerry and aunt Dorothy with, Jack Darnley's going to be married, what do you say to that?"

"God bless me, Val, this is news indeed. Are you sure? It is so sudden. There has not been one word breathed about his paying attention even to any girl as far as I know. Why it seems only a year or two ago that Jack was a boy here in a short jacket, riding to the meet on his pony by my side."

"All the same it's true, he told me himself. Time flies,

doesn't it, Father, Jack's twenty-five, and if one could believe his own valuation of himself as wise as if he was seventy-five.

"My private opinion is that Jack's an ass to marry so soon, but in these matters everyone pleases himself and the person who tries to prevent a man going his own way gets the worst of it," said my father, little knowing that he was treading on delicate ground with me, for how could he know I was doing my very best to induce Jack to look before he took the final plunge. "Who is the lady, Val, of course you have told Dorothy and Gerry, but they must sit and listen to the story in patience a second time, for I want to know."

I could not help giving a quick look in the direction of my sister, to see if there were any signs upon her face of an intention to unfold her private opinions, but she was looking at her plate and I could not see her expression. I was firmly convinced that she kept her head bent on purpose that nothing should be betrayed by her face, so I had great hope that she meant to keep her own counsel.

"Well, father, I know very little about her to tell you the truth, for I haven't set eyes upon her yet, but I hear she is lovely and charming, her name is Miss De Mora."

"De Mora, De Mora," said my father reflectively, "I don't remember the name. Who are they, and where do they live?"

"I believe they are not English," I answered, "but Spanish Americans, they are staying in England, and by all I hear, seem to be very rich."

"Money is not a 'sine quâ non' for Jack and I would rather have heard he had chosen a penniless English girl than a foreign heiress, even if she were a princess, with oil wells for a heritage."

I fancied I saw a covert look of triumph in Gerry's face as her eyes were lifted towards me for one moment, but the glance was so instantaneous that I could not be sure, still, the impression was one of slight annoyance that the idea left upon me, and I did not say a word, waiting for my father to continue, feeling sure he would next ask how and where they had met. Nor was I disappointed, for his next question came in a few seconds and was:

"Where did he meet her and how long has he known her?"

"They were staying with the Grahams together, she and her mother, with whom she is travelling, and they met there some time this summer, I believe."

"The whole thing seems to have been settled in the deuce of a hurry. Have'nt you anything else to say about them than that, Val?"

Now was my opportunity, and as a good deal depends upon striking whilst the iron is hot in this world, I seized it at once.

"Yes, I have," I said, "something that struck me at

once when I got your message about finding someone to fill up the party next week. We are all no doubt anxious to see this young lady, why should not she and her mother be invited to come here with Jack. I told Aunt Dorothy of my plan before dinner, and she does not see why it shouldn't be done if you don't mind. What do you say?" I knew that the way I had plunged into the request, headlong so to say, was somewhat calculated to astonish the simple mind, of such a man given to all the old fashioned prejudices of his bringing up and education, but the opportunity was too good to be lost and I calculated partly upon carrying the citadel of his possible objections by assault. He turned to my aunt and, with a slight amount of hesitation, as if consulting with himself more than her, said:

"H'm, yes, it might perhaps be managed. Naturally we are anxious to make the acquaintance of Jack's wife, aren't we, Dorothy, as she will come to be a near neighbour after her marriage. But is it feasible? We none of us know her or her mother, and under these circumstances could one invite them; what do you propose to do in the first place?"

This question was addressed to no one in particular, but as I felt that I had done my part of the business, and it was the turn of either my aunt or my sister to take up the conversation, I resolutely took up my knife and fork and kept a dignified silence. My aunt Dorothy after a short

pause, evidently in the hope that I should again make some suggestion, and when the fact of my unavailability became established and no loophole of escape offered, began with some signs of uneasiness.

"Well, you see, Stephen, when Valentine proposed it before dinner I thought perhaps we could manage it, but I said we must wait to hear what you suggested. Of course as Jack was your ward, and almost like your son, it is different, and we could perhaps write to the young lady's mother and invite them to come next week, or even send the invitation through Jack himself, but it must all depend upon what you wish."

My father looked puzzled.

"I thought women all knew more about these sorts of things than men, Dorothy, points of etiquette and such like that we haven't time to bother about, I must think about it and tell you what conclusion I come to to-morrow. It will be time enough if we settle it before the first post leaves."

It was with a huge sigh of relief that I found the subject was dropped at this juncture, and without one word or sign from Gerry. Well, after all my fears she was a good girl, full of tact, and for the first time that evening I felt thoroughly comfortable, and my dinner could digest itself in peace, undisturbed by any bitter fancies. We talked of the hunting, the horses and the guests for the ensuing

week, but an allwise providence ordered, no doubt with a watchful eye over my digestion, that the disturbing topic of Jack's affairs should not again be mooted. The evening passed off most pleasantly, my sister and I adjourning to the billiard-room, after we had finished our coffee, where I smoked my cigar and played a game of billiards with my sister, who played a very fair game, quite good enough to be an interesting adversary. My aunt Dorothy sat in a chair by the fire reading or working, not having the horror of smoke which one so often finds in ladies of her age, who have been brought up in the school of the beginning of the century when the soothing weed was almost an insult in the presence of the fair sex. My father had gone to his own 'den' as he called it, with a nod to me saying he should see me later when I wanted my whiskey and soda before bedtime. There is nothing nicer to my mind than a game of billiards after dinner, when, 'bien entendu', it is not one of those solemn functions during which one has to calculate to a nicety every stroke: and, either one's honour as a performer, or one's money, is involved, in which case it is well to wait until the duties of digestion are completely fulfilled: but one of those nice desultory games, when one talks and laughs and enjoys the gentle exercise round the table. I contend that nothing can be more pleasant: one's temper never suffers and it dispels the kind of laziness, engendered

by a cigar and an armchair, which is so hard to resist, and such insidious minor evil habits grow upon the male mind to an extent, that, in time renders an evening when indulgence in them is forbidden, a veritable penance resulting in a badly disguised ill temper. It is one of the undisputed privileges of the male sex, I believe, this sort of social carte blanche given to the masculine after dinner lethargy. When does a well regulated wife permit herself to grumble if her lord and master retires to his armchair with book and cigar, and who knows if even he does not also make night hideous with the sound of snoring? And yet patient Griselda may be wakeful, and conscious of a wish to discourse sweeter music than that of the sounds her husband produces from the instrument of slumber, or for the delights of conversation or other things, yet she will not awake him, because men like their after dinner nap. Woe betide however Angelina, if she should indulge in such an unnecessary pause in life's pleasures, if Edwin should decree it otherwise. No, she must shake off dull sloth, and at once arise to play his accompaniment if he sings, or perchance picquet if it pleases him. I confess that it would be so with me, for I could not bear to see my wife, if I had one, indulge in a habit only permissible in boa constrictors and men, but I also hope she would possess the true feminine respect for my weakness, and forbear to rouse me. Such is the world, and one loves

on self what is uubearable in another. However, I am not entirely selfish and try by all means in my power not to contract the habit, therefore, I extol the merits of a genial game of billiards, to prevent the fiend of sloth getting too firm a grip upon me to be shaken off. It was just one of these pleasant desultory games that I played that evening with my sister, and admirably it suited me, whilst she chatted about the various little country events, and went over the hunting prospects of the week to come, arranging that we should go on the following day when the meet was within easy distance. It was settled without much difficulty, what horses we were to ride, and at about eleven my sister left the room with my aunt, and I found myself in a better mind than I had been for some weeks. I put away my cue and opening my cigar case, to make sure I had a good stock to go on with, prepared to join my father in his sanctum, where I intended to refresh the inner man with a whisky and soda, before settling down to a fresh cigar and a talk.

I found my father sitting in his big armchair, by his side was a reading-lamp and in his hand a book, but by his somewhat startled way of raising it quickly to the level of his eyes I more than suspected he had been indulging in a little refreshing folding of the hands to slumber. However there was no doubt he was glad to be disturbed for once, for his genial:

"Here you are, Val, well I am glad, as I want to talk to you and you were so long I began to feel sleepy" left me no misgivings on that score. I smiled, knowing that his having begun to feel sleepy was one of the amiable fictions which even the most noble minds indulge in, when they are caught out, in such weakness as a nap.

I gave him a cigar out of my case, and poured out a goodly draught for us each, as he had not been long in telling me to do, and placing them within easy reach we both settled down to our conversation. We sifted the whole matter to the bottom, about Jack's affairs, and my father agreed with me that we ought to do all we could to find out as much as possible about the De Moras. He did not ridicule my suspicions the least, in fact told me he looked upon them as quite natural, going so far as to admit that he, in a minor degree, shared them. I had made, as Jack had given me permission to do, quite a clean breast of the whole thing to my father, not even hiding what Jack himself had said or the gossip of Homburg as emanating from Markham. My father quite saw that the only, and best thing we could do for the present, would be to invite Miss De Mora and her mother for the following week, and see for ourselves what they were like, and then we could form an opinion and make what plans seemed possible towards the unearthing of their history. It was agreed that the following morning a letter should be written by my

aunt Dorothy to Mrs. De Mora and enclosed in one to Jack from my father; and with this understanding we separated for the night.

It was with a great deal of interest that I read the following letters, shown me the next morning before starting to the meet, which were intended to be sent by the early post. I give that written by my aunt first.

"Brantingford Manor,
Wraybury.

Dear Mrs. De Mora,

I feel sure you will excuse my writing to ask you a favour, when you hear from Mr. Darnley of the old and long friendship existing between him and ourselves. Indeed, as my brother was his guardian during his long minority and regards Jack with an affection only second to that he has for his own son, you, I cannot doubt, will not resent the request contained in this letter, even if you are unable to comply with it. If you and your daughter will do us the pleasure of coming to stay with us, on Monday the 14th for a fortnight, it will indeed be kind, as we are both, my brother and myself, most anxious to make the acquaintance of yourself, and your daughter, to whom we hear Mr. Darnley is so soon to be married. I have enclosed my letter in one to Mr. Darnley, whom I have asked to

explain our old and intimate terms of affection, and to do his best to persuade you to accept.

Permit me, dear Mrs. De Mora, to express once more the hope that you may be induced to give us the pleasure of your company next week.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

Tuesday. Nov. 8th. Dorothy Trentham."

My father's letter to Jack ran as follows:—

"Dear Jack,

Val tells us of your engagement, and by the first available post I send all my best wishes. You can't expect me, who have stood almost in a father's shoes with regard to you for so many years, not to be anxious to see and welcome your future wife, so I beg of you to do your best to persuade Mrs. De Mora to accept the accompanying invitation for next week. You must explain to her what interest we all take in you; and therefore our anxiety to make her acquaintance and that of her daughter, and beg her to excuse the unceremoniousness of the invitation. We have a couple of balls, and a cheery party in the house, to offer as inducements to the ladies, and a few pheasants to shoot

and some meets and good horses to ride for you, to say nothing of the welcome that will always await you whenever you come.

Yours affectionately

Stephen Trentham."

These letters were despatched by the early post, and many were the conjectures as to the reception they would meet with, but, as it was no use speculating upon events, we all anxiously awaited the post which would bring us the answer. I penned a few short lines to Jack, adding my quota to the general list of petitioners, and begging him to incline Mrs. De Mora's ear as far as he could to our request. In the course of post came the long looked for answer and Mrs. De Mora wrote a perfectly 'comme il faut' little note of acceptance to Aunt Dorothy, thanking her in the most irreproachable terms for the friendly spirit in which her note was written; and expressing her pleasure in having so pleasant an opportunity of making the acquaintance of the family, who had been second parents to her future son-in-law. In short, nothing could have been more perfect than her mode of expression, and the words, written in a bold decided handwriting, were very well chosen and the phrases turned in a way that bespoke a person of refinement and education.

There could be no adverse comment upon such a letter

and one felt instinctively, that whatever might be wrong, the writer was not a common or vulgar woman. Even Gerry, I think, must have felt, both from the handwriting and the well chosen sentences, that the writer was no common person and that whatever was the matter must be looked for far below the surface. If this refinement was not natural at least it was so well studied as to have become second nature, and would require more than ordinary astuteness to strip off.

We were all, as I need hardly say, curious to see the De Moras for Jack's sake, but if two of us had told the truth, viz: my sister and myself, we should have had to own that it was mostly to justify, or disprove, our personal suspicions that we felt an intense relief when it was finally settled that they were to join our party.

Now that it was definitely arranged there was nothing left but for us to possess our souls in patience until the day of their arrival should come. In the meantime there was nothing of any special interest to record and the time passed uneventfully with the exception of some pleasant days' hunting, but as I have nothing to do now with stirring accidents by flood and field they can remain unrecorded. It may be as well now to give some account of the guests, who were to form the house-party for the ensuing week, so that they may not be entirely unfamiliar. But they deserve a new chapter.

CHAPTER VII.

THOSE WHO ACCEPTED IT.

The guests were to be ten in number besides ourselves, Jack and the De Moras, but to be quite accurate two of the party could hardly be called, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, guests, since they were my uncle and my cousin Lord Edgworth and Lady Mary Ravenhill. The latter had been almost living in our house for some years as she and my sister had been taught by the same governess. The reason of this being the death of her mother, my father's sister, which caused such grief to my uncle as to determine him to spend some years travelling, during which time Mary came to complete her education at Brantingford, with her cousin. They therefore could hardly be included as guests but rather members of the family. A young couple recently married, Dick Broughton the eldest son of our master of the hounds, who had just settled down to a country life in a small place not far from Brantingford, with his pretty wife who was as ardent a follower as Dick himself of the Broughton pack, represented the sporting

element of the party. To give the next place of honour to the ladies comes Mrs. Stavely and her daughter Gertrude. The elder lady was an old acquaintance of my father's and her chief points of interest as far as I could see were her fondness for the noble game of whist, a favourite evening amusement of my father's, and her extreme amiability to 'eligibles', in which category she did me the honour to include my humble self. Miss Stavely was a talented girl in many ways, and possessed great fascinations for almost every member of the male sex, but hitherto whether because of her lack of fortune, or because of a subtle something which, upon closer acquaintance failed to make her fascinations lasting, she was still an unwon prize in the matrimonial lottery. The party was completed by four men of whom it is necessary to say but little beyond their names, Bob Towneley a gallant defender of his country in the —th Hussars, of whom Gerry always said that the most noticeable feature was a single eyeglass, with which he carried on a continual war to induce it to stay in his eye, displaying a determination worthy of a better cause. Tom Dering, well known as one of the best dancers in London and an agreeable fellow to women and men, of whom no one said anything unpleasant, but who would not set the Thames on fire, and who devoted most of his time to fashionable frivolities. To make all house parties complete there should be one at least to represent the

more gentle pursuits of life, such as music, and those arts so dear to the feminine heart. In short, a carpet knight, who will not always be given over to the power of the dog and gun. Such a one was Philip Whitmore, he could discourse sweet music with agile fingers by the hour together; or paint, and at a stretch, even help a fair lady to select the most becoming style of dress wherewith to adorn her beauty. The curled darling of a hundred drawing-rooms, where he was consulted in every small dilemma about private theatricals, concerts and dances, was Philip, and as eagerly sought for at all country houses as if he had been a genius. Last but not least, at any rate in my estimation, comes Donald Travers a great pal of mine, one of the best of fellows, a sad trial to his father, a very righteous Scotch peer, Lord Clackmannan by name, but with his intimates no one was more popular than Dot Travers, as his nickname was, with his endless jokes, his ready laugh and his imperturbable good humour. The most irreverent of mortals in whose composition the quality of respect was utterly wanting was Dot, but the goodness of his heart was so undeniable that no one could really be angry for more than a minute, even when he made fun out of one's most pet and particular weakness. The only time I ever remember any one getting really indignant with him, was once when his father had occasion to rebuke him for some foolish escapade. "Donald," he said, "can I not instil into your mind that in the course

of time you will have to bear the name of Clackmannan, and beg of you to prove yourself worthy of it." "But I like Dot so much better, Governor," said the incorrigible joker, "I don't think I can live if I have three syllables to support." Even the face of the puritanical old lord had to wrinkle into something like a smile, and as usual Dot got the best of the bargain, turning away wrath with a cheerful answer. Travers had one weakness, which had been his since the time he first cast off his round jackets and entered man's estate, and this was to fancy himself in love with every pretty face he met. My own opinion of him was that with death alone would he get the better of it, and so far I was right, for his fickle fancy had never yet been caught for more than a few weeks at a time; and as he knew it himself, he dreaded the day when he should really be married, for himself, as much as I did for him, and if ever any woman got him as far as the altar I threatened to come and forbid the banns, as he would be sure, before his wedding trip was over, to have met some pretty girl he would be obliged to flirt with. It is needless to add how many fair brows had already persuaded themselves that the shadow of a coronet was over them, and how many bitter disappointments had ensued, when Dot's butterfly propensities were at last realized.

Long looked for must come at last, and so did the 14th of November upon which eventful day Jack's fiancée and

her mother were to arrive. They were to take the train arriving at 4 o'clock, when the carriage went to meet them, and even my father broke through his usual rule, appearing not only in the hall to welcome his guests, but following them into the drawing-room, and staying during the solemn, and to him incomprehensible function, known as afternoon tea. It was evident that Juanita De Mora had made a very great impression upon the whole party: and indeed she could hardly have failed to do so, for never was there a more dazzling vision of beauty than she that afternoon.

Her slender undulating figure, clothed in a dark shade of heliotrope coloured material with some soft greyish brown fur at the throat and wrists, looked perfect; and the lovely creamy skin with the warm blood flushing beneath, shaded on the brow by the bright golden hair; and the radiant eyes, all made a picture worthy the pencil of Titian himself. She was indeed marvellously lovely and instinctively one seemed to forgive any man committing a rash action, nay, almost condoning a crime, if it were for her sake.

I could see my father's face of admiration and my aunt Dorothy almost gave a gasp as the girl came up to return her greeting, so graceful was every movement and so exquisite her face. I was breathless for a few moments, and not the faintest atom of astonishment at Jack's infatuation remained. Whatever was wrong it could not be with her, for a more perfect creature could not exist, and he would

have been more than an angel, or less than a man, who having won her love, could have hesitated to make her his own.

Gerry whilst the greetings were in progress, slipped to my side and in a low tone whispered, "She is simply perfect, Val, I don't wonder at Jack, but look at the mother."

These words recalled me, from the absurd state of enchanted admiration into which I had fallen, to the ordinary world, and I withdrew my eyes unwillingly, from the direction of Miss De Mora, to turn them towards he mother. The elder lady was no less remarkable in her way, but what a different way it was! She wore a bonnet, evidently newly arrived from Paris, which surmounted a somewhat elaborate coiffure of her blue black hair and the eyes and upper part of her face were shaded by a small lace veil. This had the effect of bringing into stronger contrast the extreme whiteness of her complexion, where it was untoned by thin lace, that gave a slightly darker hue to the forehead and upper part of the face. The dark strongly marked eyebrows grew close together over the well formed, rather large nose and her eyes were of a deep impenetrable black. I was uncertain, never having seen her before, if she was paler than usual; but she gave me the impression of being so, and I fancied there was an uneasy look in her dark eyes. There was nothing in her manner, or way of speaking, to

suggest the smallest discomfort, for all her words were well chosen, and suited to the occasion, and she spoke slowly, and with not a single trace of agitation. She looked perfectly at her ease as she stood, with her heavy mantle of rich fur unclasped at the throat, and thrown back showing the dark dress of mingled silk and velvet: and it was probably only the effect of my imagination, acting in concert with suspicion, that made me fancy her pallor was unusual and her eyes restless. Her position was remarkably firm and unlike a woman who would be afraid to challenge the opinion of the world. She was very tall, and as she stood there with one foot a little distance in front of the other, and her head erect and the whole body drawn up straight and well balanced, she looked more like one of those strong minded women, common enough in these days of semi-equality of the sexes, who rather court observation, than one of the shrinking feminine sort, who might feel shy or embarrassed by the presence of so many strangers. But whatever the reason might be, the impression she left upon me was far from an agreeable one, and as she turned towards me and bowed, in answer to Jack's introduction of me, I felt repelled by the cold smile, and when I felt my hand taken in the firm grasp of her shapely but rather too strong looking one, I could hardly repress an involuntary movement of disquiet. Something in her cold determined face and almost powerful figure made me feel she was a woman

to be feared, whom it would be wiser not to offend: and woe be to the unlucky man who relied upon finding her accessible through any of the ordinary frailties of an average feminine heart. Jack's face had been one of radiant pride when he noticed how favourable an impression was made by his fiancée, but he looked almost pleadingly at me when making me known to Mrs. De Mora, as if to beg me to reserve my judgment until I was further acquainted with her, for he evidently noticed in my manner that I, at any rate, did not succumb at once to the charms of the elder lady. Possibly his love had made him extra sensitive to small things, for, when nature robs a man of one of his senses, she makes up for the loss by endowing him preternaturally in another, and upon this principle, no doubt, as he was blind about Juanita, he was sharp sighted in proportion about others.

It takes me longer to describe this than the real time I had for observation, for the whole thing passed quickly and as soon as the two ladies had emptied their cups of tea they were marshalled by Aunt Dorothy to their rooms, to divest themselves of their garments, and occupy themselves in those mysteries, of unpacking and lying upon sofas, so dear to the feminine portion of the community in the hours intervening between tea and dinner time. We, of the male sex, are rather at a loss to know why it is that ladies so often spend these hours in solitary commune, or in the arrangement of their toilettes for the evening, but still

such is their custom, and it is one of those secrets jealously guarded from the unmarried men of society. I was naturally anxious to talk to Jack, and I guessed that he too would not be unwilling to say something of what he felt to me, so by a very natural arrangement we both found ourselves settling to go to the billiard-room to smoke a cigar together. When we arrived at the door of this masculine retreat we heard the voices of Dot Travers and Bob Towneley, who were evidently deep in a game of pool with one or two of the other men, and not wishing to join them at that moment, and well knowing that if once we got in, we could not well leave without taking part in the somewhat noisy game, or talk uninterruptedly, we decided to wend our way towards the stables. As the conversation between us was more or less a recapitulation of what had already passed it is not necessary to take any notice of it here, but I must, in order to show the reader the reason of some of the events which were to follow, give some small description of the house.

On one side of the house lay a garden given up entirely to decoration, which was laid out more or less in what is known in England as the Italian style, upon this looked the windows of the drawing-room and dining-room. Upon the other side lay the billiard-room and smoking-room, with a side door to the house leading to a short path going to the stables, and so by shrubberies to the fruit

garden and ultimately to the woods. On the third side of the house was the big front entrance, of which the portico was so large that the roof of it served as a kind of balcony to two of the rooms upon the second story. As the hall was very high, it ran up to the level of the second story, giving room only for these two rooms as it were on one side, and above them ran a passage out of which one entered a range of very fine large rooms, which had always been devoted to guests, because they were the best in the house. The two smaller rooms over the portico, or rather with the windows opening on to the balcony formed by the roof of it, had always, since our school days, been Jack's and mine, and the old order of things having remained unchanged, it was these two rooms that he and I were to occupy as usual. The rooms above were belonging to my sister and my aunt, and those immediately above mine, which were the largest and possessing a lovely view over the woods and park, had been assigned to Mrs. De Mora and her daughter. The unattached portion of the guests inhabited a portion of the house to the north called the bachelors' wing, over a set of rooms including a small sitting room, which had always been kept for the occupation of my uncle, and cousin when they came on their frequent visits to us: on the same floor were the rooms of the other guests, the Broughtons and Staveleys.

When we all assembled in the drawing-room for dinner

Miss De Mora looked more lovely than ever, in a dress of some cloudy material between the colours of blue and grey, trimmed with silver, which set off her brilliant hair, and the dazzling delicacy of her skin and complexion, to an extraordinary degree. Mrs. De Mora wore a dress of a rather dark shade of 'fraise ecrasée' with some beautiful lace, and round her throat was a splendid necklace of diamonds of rather a florid pattern, somewhat in the form of a fringe, which hung over her bosom almost to the top of her dress, which was well cut and fitted her very closely. It was only in evening costume that one became fully aware of what a largely built woman she was, as it became visible that her massive shoulders were due to a strong build rather than anything else. She was more to be described as of a bony frame than not, and anything more unlike the willowy undulating figure of her daughter could hardly be imagined.

We all paired off and the dinner was as gay as such circumstances permit, when the guests are all more or less strangers, and have not yet begun to start any of the innumerable small jokes which are inevitable in a country house-party, worth nothing of themselves, but which serve to make every one lively after a few days' companionship. Dot Travers, who had taken Mrs. Broughton into dinner, was manfully trying to keep his attention sufficiently fixed to answer her harmless babble about the subject

nearest her heart, the meets of her father-in-law's hounds, but I, who knew him, could see that all his eyes were for the lovely Juanita and all the signs of one of his evanescent passions peeped out of them at every turn. Bob Towneley was engaged in a duel with his eyeglass, out from behind which, when he finally persuaded it to do its duty, and stick to him, he cast glances of admiration at my sister at whose right hand he sat, and for whom he cherished a hopeless attachment. Tom Dering tried to interest Mrs. De Mora, whom he was within speaking distance of, in the recital of various incidents of the past season in town and the prospects of the ensuing one, with singular insuccess but perfect satisfaction to himself. Philip Whitmore was talking music and art to Mrs. Stavely, who was rapidly getting beyond her depth, poor woman, but in case he might be an eligible, took care to make use of her sweetest expression, and when possible explain how fond of music and painting she and her daughter were, never missing a concert or exhibition the whole season, when they were not absolutely obliged. The two most suited to each other and who had most subjects in common, I believe, were Mary Ravenhill and myself, and we found much to talk of, indeed it was owing to her quick intelligence that I was able to see and laugh at the smothered anger of Mrs. De Mora, who was undergoing a sort of examination from Dering as to whom she knew, or did not know, and

the hopeless flounderings of Mrs. Stavely in the quicksands of culture, whither she was led by the unconscious hand of Whitmore. At last dinner being over, we all left the dining-room, and in the course of the evening it seemed as if the couples had become a little better sorted, Jack gravitating naturally to the side of Juanita, whilst Philip Whitmore kept up a soothing murmur upon the piano, which permitted of all sorts of conversation going on, unheard even by one's nearest neighbour, and which necessitated leaning close down to the ear intended to hear, a process that had decided charms for Jack. I employed myself in a very enjoyable talk to my uncle for half an hour, having slipped out of the room with him to smoke a small cigar, as he was miserable without his smoke directly after his coffee, and I was too glad to join him; and when I returned I went to talk for a few moments to Mrs. De Mora, more for the curiosity I felt to make a closer observation of her than anything else. The result of this conversation gave me occasion for a good deal of thought, and I could not get her out of my mind even when we all separated, some to bed and some to the billiard-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOES SHE INTEND MURDER?

I went at once to the billiard-room where I found most of the men except my father, my uncle, Broughton and Whitmore, who had adjourned to the smoking-room, where they had begun a modest rubber of whist. The moment I appeared a chorus of voices greeted me clamouring for a game of pool and although I should at the moment have preferred a quiet cigar and to bed early I saw it was no use and that in my character of host, in the absence of my father from the room, I could not well avoid joining them. So there was nothing for it, and saying "All right, I will just go and put my smoking coat on, and refill my cigar case, and rejoin you in no time," I went out of the room and ran up the stairs, not wishing to keep them waiting long. I did not stop to light a candle as I passed through the hall although all the lights in the house had been put out as they always were when the ladies retired. I knew exactly where to put my hand on my smoking coat and in the pocket lay as I

knew a case full of cigars, so I ran on, my thin evening shoes making no sound on the thick carpets. I reached my room and by the light of the moon; which shone brilliantly into my window, for it was one of those peculiarly bright November nights, when a slight frost renders the air extraordinarily clear, and the light of the moon is strong enough to show objects distinctly, I had no difficulty in finding my coat. I put my evening one down and slipping my smoking jacket on in its place turned to leave my room, when just as I put my hand on the door, which I had left ajar, I became aware of a faint rustling sound in the passage outside. I am not a superstitious man and did not for one moment think of anything bordering on the supernatural, although in common with many old houses Brantingford could boast of its family ghost, but at that moment an unaccountably feeling of something uncanny crept over me irresistibly.

My first feeling was that I would at once go into the passage and see who, or what, was the cause of this gentle slow rustling noise, but as it came nearer by such very slow degrees I came to the conclusion it must be the step of someone who wished to creep in unheard and unobserved. Thinking that I might perhaps catch out some housemaid in prying into my letters or jewellery, or bent on some errand not included in her duties, I drew back noiselessly and stepped into the window drawing the thick curtain round me. By

this means I was entirely hidden and saw distinctly every object within the room, by peeping between the curtain and the wall against which it hung, and by a similar manoeuvre on the other side of the curtain, I could see on to the roof of the portico upon which my window, and that of Jack's room next door gave, as has already been described. As the noise I heard might have been caused by someone trying to rob the house, entering by way of this flat roof, I at once looked out, but all was still there, and the moon was so bright that had an object the size of a mouse been there I must have seen it. Nothing there at any rate, and I stood breathless as I could and motionless behind the curtain, vowing vengeance upon any prying housemaid should she appear. It seemed ages that I stood there, and still it can hardly have been more than a few seconds; yet I had all sorts of misgivings if the party in the billiard-room might not wonder at my long absence, and Jack was quite capable of coming to fetch me, and thus ruining my chance of discovering who it was that was creeping about the passages at such a time. At the moment of these thoughts I fancied I saw the door of my room stir, but so noiselessly and so slowly that I could not be sure. Fixing my eyes upon it I watched carefully, and sure enough it opened, hairsbreadth by hairsbreadth, evidently pushed by some hand behind it. So carefully and silently was it done that had I been in

the room, with my back turned, even I should not have been aware of it, and the person, whoever it was, might have looked in, and if they had seen me retired again, leaving me none the wiser—unless I had seen it. In another moment the door was far enough open to admit of a body passing through, and I saw a tall figure completely swathed in a long black dress, glide into the room, stand for one second, and then a white hand was stretched out which drew something off the head of the figure.

Good Heavens, what a shock it was! Mrs. De Mora stood before me with the moonlight full upon her pale face looking, in the weird bluish colour peculiar to the moon's rays, wan and almost ghostly. It was hard to believe my eyes, but, as she stood there turning her head half towards the door as if to make sure that nobody was stirring in the house besides herself, there was no longer any possible doubt. I wonder that I did not betray my presence, for I felt myself start, and it was with great difficulty I repressed an exclamation, but so determined was I to see upon what errand she was bent that I forced myself to remain motionless. She was dressed in a long black garment of the kind called, I believe, a peignoir, which in its clinging simplicity showed off her tall powerfully made figure; and now that she was without the advantitious aid of laces and tournure, one saw that she was both bony, and muscular to a peculiar extent, and

looked as if she might have but little hesitation in defending herself on occasions, and with a good chance of success. She held in her hand a shawl of Spanish lace, the one I had seen her take off her head on entering the room, when, finding herself alone, she removed it, having evidently used it as a means of passing unrecognised, should she by mischance have met anyone on her voyage of discovery.

I waited, hardly daring to breathe as she crept across the room, looked at one or two things on my dressing table, which was only at arm's length from my hiding-place, and, apparently as it was not with me or my belongings that she was intent, a look of disappointment came over her face and she turned and crept to the door as noiselessly as she had come. A feeling of horror froze the very blood in my veins, as it flashed across me that it was Jack's room she was seeking for. Good God, could the woman mean to find his room and take her opportunity to murder him in his sleep! My second thoughts were calmer, and besides the fact of my knowing Jack to be at that moment in the billiard-room, where no harm could come to him, I felt sure that whatever this terrible woman might contemplate hereafter, it could not be Jack's murder before his settlements were signed, sealed and made legal by his marriage with her daughter, before which event they could be of no effect.

I hesitated whether or not to spring out of my hiding-place and confront her at once, but I felt that such a consummately clever woman as Mrs. De Mora must be, would get the better of me and I should only be put in the wrong. What more natural than for her to say that she had left her room to seek her maid, and that her candle having blown out, for she carried an unlighted one in her hand, she had lost her way and mistaken the room. I decided to remain where I was, although my impatience was almost insupportable, as I could now hear that she had glided into the next room, and a slight sound told me that she was evidently examining some of the objects on Jack's table. No doubt, when once she found the room she was searching for, she would take her bearings and return as quickly and silently as she could, as it was not likely she would run more risks of discovery than necessary. Again a slight sound in the next room reached my ears, which I was straining to catch the faintest noise, and this time I felt sure she was gently opening the window of the next room. I peeped cautiously from my hiding place, this time turning my gaze to the balcony. Sure enough there stood the lady, and with her head slightly raised as if to look at the windows on the upper story. After a second I saw her just raise her hand very slightly, as if indicating to some one above her the room from which she had issued, and nod her head as

if in an affirmative manner, then turning round she reentered the room and I heard the window softly closed as before. In a few seconds I was aware of the mysterious rustle, which had heralded her coming, passing my door and growing fainter and fainter as she crept down the passage, and I knew that Mrs. De Mora had accomplished her errand and was retracing her steps to her room. I stayed for a few seconds, during which it flashed across me that the rooms occupied by Mrs. De Mora and her daughter were almost above mine and Jack's, and that the signs given by hand and head were intended probably for the younger lady, who was doubtless looking from her window above. I delayed no longer to rejoin the party in the billiard-room, fearing that already my unreasonably long absence might be commented on. It may well be imagined the unutterable state of uncertainty I was in as to the best course to pursue, if to tell Jack that very evening or hold my peace, but by the time I reached the billiard-room I had decided to say nothing that night, to think it well over in my mind and reserve all my forces for the following day. A discontented murmur greeted me as I went in.

"Well, you are a pretty fellow, Val, to keep us waiting like this, have you been to wake the housemaid up to tell her to put a warming pan in your bed, or what?" chaffs Bob Towneley.

Dot Travers took up the talk next with "Hang it all you look as if you had met a ghost on the stairs, or stopped to play the bones with part of the skeleton of your great great grandmother, whilst old Nick sang to the banjo."

"I am awfully sorry to have kept you fellows waiting, but to tell you the truth it was so bright looking out of my windows, that I stopped to open it to see if there would be frost enough to stop hunting to-morrow."

It was a very lame excuse but the only one I could think of. Dot however did not let the lameness of it pass unnoticed, and with the utmost gravity remarked.

"Of course he can't own to what he really stayed away for, but I happen to know he found someone waiting for a word or two behind one of the doors." And he turned his back and began kissing loudly upon his hand; which was greeted by a good deal of laughter in which I could not help joining, not because I saw any joke in it but Dot's serious face was irresistible.

At last the game got fairly under weigh, and under the cheering influence of whiskies and sodas, the evening seemed to pass pleasantly enough for all assembled, at any rate if noise is any criterion, it did, for there was more than a fair share of it. I felt disinclined enough for such things, but, I had to sit it out, and it was with a sigh of thankfulness that I saw them all lay by their cues, and vote for a final drink and to bed.

I could not make up my mind to turn into bed as I felt unable to rest until I had fixed my best course with regard to what I had been witness to that evening. As a preliminary step I opened my window and stepped on to the balcony, meaning to make sure if Mrs. De Mora was standing in a position from which she could have intended the signs to reach her daughter's eyes. I could be positive as to the place she had occupied, as not a single thing escaped my eager eyes at the time. Jack was evidently in the land of dreams, as there was no light visible through the drawn blind over his window. I made sure of this before looking at the upper windows, for fear of raising any suspicion in his mind should he by chance catch sight of me. He might have thought me displaying unnecessary curiosity as to the actions of his fair lady, which was not what I wished him to imagine.

It was nearly 2 o'clock and I had no doubt that everyone would be sound asleep, and I could investigate the view from the balcony of the upper windows unmolested. Carefully choosing the identical spot for my standpoint, which I had seen occupied by Mrs. De Mora an hour and a half previously, I raised my eyes. Not only could I see the windows above me and slightly to the right of my room, but to my astonishment I also saw that in one of those farthest from me a bright light, evidently of at least one, if not two, wax candles was burning. The moon had by this time entirely

disappeared, and the night was starless now and dark. I therefore had no fear of being seen even should one of the ladies take a sudden fancy to look out. I crossed the balcony to the further corner, from which a still better view of the upper windows would I knew be obtained, and looked attentively at the still illuminated one. This was I own an intensely impertinent piece of curiosity, and unwarrantable in any man, but I must excuse myself on the plea of such an intense suspicion of foul play as the scene of that evening had aroused in my mind. Presently in a clear well defined silhouette upon the white blind, I saw the unmistakable figure, and marked features of Mrs. De Mora, appear. Her movements were at first somewhat confused, but I could see that she held in her hand some object, the nature of which it was impossible for me to determine. I watched the shadows upon the blind intently, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing the taller of the two, which I conjectured to be that of Mrs. De Mora, turn in such a way that the shape of what she held in her hand became distinctly visible. I saw that it must be a letter, or paper of some kind, nearly akin in form to a letter. This then had been her object in visiting Jack's room to find some paper of interest to herself or her daughter, possibly a copy of his marriage settlement, or could it be I wondered to obtain his signature. Was the woman an accomplished forger? More unlikely things had happened before now. At

any rate I now felt no hesitation, and my mind was made up to tell Jack, upon the first opportunity offering the next day, of the whole occurrence.

Almost as my determination was formed I saw the light in the windows above extinguished, and all was darkness and tranquillity, however I remained for a few more minutes to make sure that the light would not reappear. After a few minutes spent in gazing at the windows I took it for granted that the ladies had at length sought their pillows and I went back to my room. Now, that I had got back to the comparative warmth of the house, I realized how bitterly cold it had been on the balcony in the nipping air of a November night. During my vigil the excitement of a possible discovery had not permitted me to notice it, but when this feeling subsided it was but too evident, and chilled to the bone I betook myself to bed.

But sleep did not visit me until the early morning hours, and in the wakeful time I spent after turning in, there was ample opportunity to reconsider the events of the past. I determined to rise early and endeavour to catch Jack if possible before breakfast, he was always an early riser, and I knew that this would be the best opportunity to catch him for a quiet talk, for it was a hunting day and I knew that at half past ten we should, all of us who had horses to ride, be in the saddle. This settled I fell asleep soundly and dreamlessly, but as man only proposes and God disposes

I did not open my eyes until half past nine, in spite of my honest determination to rise early, with the laudable intention of destroying Jack's peace of mind for the day, as I was firmly persuaded my revelations would do. I dressed as hastily as it was possible for a man who has to run the gauntlet of all the critical eyes of his fellow Nimrods, than which, not even those of the fair sex are sharper to espy a crooked bow or misplaced wrinkle. I found the whole party assembled at breakfast, and I cast more than one curious glance at Mrs. De Mora, and her daughter, to discover any traces, if such there were, in their faces of their late vigil; or in the elder lady any signs of uneasiness.

Jack was sitting by the side of his fiancée and her beautiful face was as calm and sweet as ever. I could hardly believe, as I looked at the innocent blue eyes and bright smile, that she could be implicated in any plot against Jack's welfare, although, in the course of the small opportunity I had had for observation, I felt pretty sure that all the infatuation was on Jack's side and that, though she perhaps might like him, she was not desperately in love. Still I could not believe that this fair young creature, gifted with such beauty and the face of an angel, should be but a whited sepulchre full of all wickedness, and deliberately capable of any plot to ruin the life and happiness of a fine noble young fellow, such as I knew Jack to be. That she was capable of love and devotion, tenderness,

and such feminine qualities, one could not doubt if one looked at the gentle expression of the soft eyes and little rosy mouth. Happy would be the man who could rouse these feelings and knew how to keep them for his own. And yet had I not had ocular demonstration, but a few short hours ago, that this girl was to a certain extent in league with her mother to discover something, what I could not tell, which it seemed more likely was for their own advantage than Jack's. Of Mrs. De Mora I could only catch a glimpse every now and then, as she had chosen a seat with her back to the light, and it was impossible to see more than an indistinct blurred mass, except on the one or two rare occasions when she turned a little. All I could see was that she was pale, but there was not a trace of agitation. Indeed there was no cause for her to display any, for of course she was in ignorance of my having seen her the previous night. After breakfast I hunted high and low to find Jack, and at last espied him strolling in the garden, and just as I started in pursuit I caught sight of the flash of a petticoat alongside of him, and guessed that he was bidding a tender farewell to his fair lady before facing the dangers of the field. Another opportunity was thus lost, but as I knew he was going to ride to the meet it would be easy for me to join him, and, dropping behind the others, to talk as we rode along.

CHAPTER IX.

WILL HE LIVE OR DIE?

All the men who were to hunt assembled in the stable-yard to mount, and when Jack appeared I at once asked him to do his best to have a little talk with me as we went to the meet, and it was arranged that he and I should allow the others to start a few minutes in advance.

Mr. and Mrs. Broughton and Bob Towneley had their own horses, as the former lived near enough to have them sent over, and the latter, being quartered at a town close by, had done the same. Dering and Travers were mounted upon two of my father's hunters, and Philip Whitmore, who was not a rider, went in the break as escort fort he ladies who did not hunt. These of course included Mrs. De Mora, Juanita and the Stavelys who drove to the meet, and these, under the able guidance of the coachman and groom who knew the country well, were to be shown as much of the run as was possible on wheels. Mary Ravenhill and Gerry were to accompany them to the meet, as their horses had been sent on with the groom who was

told off to ride after them, with sandwiches, covert coats and such luxuries as are permitted to ladies in the hunting field.

At last they all got off, my father riding a new horse that he had lately bought, and which I had seen in the stable the day before and disapproved of, but as it had been bought with a high character, and my father was a fine rider, I did not further remark save to notice that he seemed a bit gay at starting. Just as the last horse clattered out of the stone-paved yard Jack turned up as before agreed, and he and I proceeded to jog off to Stoneboro' Gorse in company; knowing the country blindfold we knew that, should they have thrown off, we could find them again in the case of being a few minutes late.

"Before you begin your talk, Val, just tell me if you don't think Juanita the most lovely girl you ever saw. Agree with me and you may fire away with what you have got to say for a month to come."

"There is no disputing that, and you may pretty well bet upon no fellow finding any one to beat her in looks, Jack," I answered "but it's on a different subject I want to talk and one not so congenial. Tell me, have you got any important papers down here with you?"

"What the deuce are you driving at, Val," remarked Jack, "what if I have?"

"Answer me first old fellow, if it's all the same to you

and then you shall know why I ask, it's not for vulgar curiosity."

This I said so seriously that Jack looked at me quite in astonishment.

"Well, no, I haven't," he said, "unless you call a letter from Fenton, about that deed of gift I told you about, an important paper."

"Do you leave those sort of things kicking about loose in your room?"

"Do you know, Val, I think you have got a screw loose somewhere this morning, but, as I believe maniacs ought to be humoured, I will answer you," he was laughing, but he would not laugh long I thought. "As it happens" he continued, "I locked it up in my despatch box this morning before I came out to join you. I brought it down in my pocket last night from town, and found it lying on my table this morning, where no doubt my man laid it when he emptied my coat-pockets before he took it to brush. Are you satisfied?"

"Well, not quite," I replied, "and if you will listen I can tell you why. Did you remark that I was out of the room rather a long time when I went to put on my smoking coat last night?"

"What in the deuce can that have to do with my papers, Val, I don't suspect you of wanting to overhaul them."

"Well, not exactly, but some one else might," was

my remark, "and what is more I think someone did."

Jack turned round on his saddle and looked me full in the face, he was, I could see, impatient and angry. "You have had your turn of questioning," he said, "now comes mine. Finish with conundrums and tell me what you mean. I suppose you think someone has been tampering with my goods and chattels, who do you suspect?"

"It is no use making any more mysteries, old chap," I answered "and I may as well make a long story short. Mrs. De Mora was in your room last night."

He blushed up to the roots of his hair and in a strained voice as if to conquer his anger said,

"Don't forget, Val, before you accuse this lady of such conduct, that she will shortly be connected very closely with me."

In my turn I felt a bitter resentment arise in my heart, but, checking some hasty words which rose to my lips, I answered as calmly as I could, "I wish I was not so sure of it, Jack, but at any rate you shall hear what I have to tell you."

In as few words as I could I told him of how I had heard the sound of a dress in the passage and hidden, hoping to discover the delinquency of a housemaid, and seen Mrs. De Mora. I neither exaggerated nor underrated the scene and described it all just as I saw it.

"If I didn't think your brain was really disordered I

should be very angry, Val, but let us talk sensibly now. There are a hundred reasons why Mrs. de Mora might have left her room, and I think there was nothing unnatural in going on to the balcony. You say she held an unlighted candle in her hand; and the house is a strange one. No doubt her candle having blown out she missed her way, and seeing a balcony, stepped out, to see if she could see any indication by lights in the windows, of the position of her room, and happening to see Juanita made a sign to show her she knew where to rejoin her."

I listened patiently to Jack's explanation, inwardly wondering if he really put any faith in his own argument, and as I saw how hopeless it was to force him to accept my view of the situation, I tried again to convince him by gentle persuasion.

"Of course you could explain it in that way, but it seems a curious coincidence," I remarked, "How do you account for my seeing a light in Mrs. De Mora's room some long time after; and her shadow on the blind in deep perusal of some paper?"

Jack turned upon me at once, "I feel half inclined to account for it by the fact of a most unwarrantable curiosity on your part, but, stop," said he seeing that it was my turn now to flush angrily, "let me finish, I feel that, for that, I am partly to blame, as I aroused a certain amount of suspicion in your mind by asking you to find out

anything you could about Mrs. De Mora. I was wrong, as it has evidently made you regard her actions, even what appear to me the simplest, in a wrong light."

I was hot and angry at Jack's folly, and could hardly restrain some very bitter words, but, as my nature is not a hasty one, I held my tongue. I was glad to find that we were within a very short distance of the Gorse, and knew that this, to me, painful talk was over. I contented myself with one more remark and allowed the subject to drop.

"Well, Jack, I am sorry to have wasted my words, and offended you, and I can only hope you may not have occasion to regret not paying attention to friendly warnings."

To this Jack replied, "Forgive me, Val, but all your suspicions seem to me so groundless, as the principal factor is wanting, you know I told you the paper you think was the object of curiosity is, at this moment, safely locked up in my despatch box."

"Well, let the subject be a sealed one between us, Jack, I wash my hands of the whole thing."

So saying we both put our hourses into a quicker pace and rode on in silence, arriving just as the huntsman moved off with the eager pack at his horse's heels. Not feeling particularly pleased I took an opposite direction to the one chosen by Jack, who espying the break, rode up to it to talk apparently to the ladies in it for a few minutes. I went to the top corner of the Gorse which I knew to

be a likely direction for the fox to break covert, meaning anyhow to be in the first flight that day and, whatever else might go wrong, to get the best of the fun if I could. As the Gorse was very thick it took a long time to draw and I had plenty of time to chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancies. What a queer world it is and what a fool is he who tries to rightside it. From the days of Shakespeare, who showed for the guidance of those who tried it, how unsuccessful was Hamlet in his attempts, when he found something rotten in the state of Denmark, to cleanse the foul spot falling a martyr to his own pains, down to my own experience, was not the world the same? Replace Hamlet with Valentine Trentham, and Denmark with the De Mora menage, and the old play was enacted with the same old motive. Who had to bear the heat and forefront of the battle but the man who, knowing he had a clearer sight and juster appreciation of facts as they stood, was fool enough to try and share his inopportune wisdom with those to whom it was important but unpalatable? The result of such untimely honesty has always been the same, and how many honourable men have had no better reward than the consciousness of their own probity, for having tried to open the eyes of the blind before the appointed time. I was so heartily fond of my old companion that it was impossible for me to wish anything unpleasant to happen, but I felt that if it did I was not responsible for any

neglected warning, and if it was only the just retribution of his blind folly, even although such an event might prove to him the value of my advice too late, I could not feel the satisfaction of gratified vanity. I felt utterly disgusted and from that moment determined to allow events to take their course, seeing as I did, that all I could do was waste of time and might embitter Jack to such an extent as to preclude him from seeking my help if any need arose. My thoughts were of the most uncompromising nature with regard to human happiness and wisdom just then, but, by the law which shows some sun behind every shadow, an occurrence at this moment changed them to a less sombre hue.

This was effected by the arrival of Mary Ravenhill who joined me, her bright face and trim figure were the silver lining to my cloud, and I put all the sombre thoughts out of my head and welcomed her. I had been aware for some time that this was the woman who could make up the sum of life for me, but for some strange and unaccountable reason I had never approached very near the vital question. It seemed to me as if she too must be as well aware of my unexpressed love for her as I was, and her gentle manner to me never left me in doubt as to her loving me. As she rode up to me that day I felt that it was in the guise of a comforting angel that she came. Life could never be a disappointment, or the time seem out

of joint, if I could secure the love and faith of the gentle woman whom I had seen and known from early girlhood; and insensibly grown to weave into all my plans for the future. I had known in a vague way that she was more to me than any other woman I had met, but I think I had been too lazy before to put my fortune to the test, to win or lose it all. That moment it seemed almost as if I felt the sensation of love at first sight, for a hot flood ran to my heart, and I knew that my life would be incomplete without her love. It was so new to me, and hitherto it had been a more or less calm possession of my own will that had been my pride, but now for the first time I became aware that the old order had changed, and that I must win her, and complete my happiness in the absolute assurance of her love.

As I am not recording my own life or its incidents it does not concern the reader to know the particulars of what happened that day, but it must suffice them to know that I left the top corner of Stoneborough Gorse the happiest man in England. I intended to find my father and inform him of my engagement to Mary on the first opportunity, I knew he would be the first to congratulate me, as I knew it to have been the nearest wish of his heart for years to see me the promised husband of my cousin, and I had every hope that my uncle also would welcome me as his son. We both rode off, for, in my new found

happiness I had laid aside all desire to be first in at the death, and chose to stay with Mary, who gave herself up to my care, and under my pilotage saw the run without facing anything very big. The line of country chosen by the fox would have tried a braver rider than she, and owing to my knowledge of the whole country she, I knew, could see the fun without risk. I could not afford to jeopardise my new found happiness, and so was very careful of her. I knew that by the line of the fox we must cross a large brook in the course of a short time, and so calling to Mary to stick close to me, I turned slightly to the right and gallopped off towards where I knew there was a farm bridge over the brook. Here I guessed that if we were lucky we should have a few minutes to give our horses their wind as, if Reynard ran as was the custom of his kind, he would halt for a few seconds in a neighbouring covert and when pressed take again to the open, passing close by where we should stand, on his way to a tract of woodland close by. I was not wrong, for just as we reached the bridge I heard the well known sound that told me the hounds were upon the foxes' track in the covert, and that we should have a few minutes to give wind to our horses, who had been pressed along to reach our friendly bridge, and needed a breathing space. I stood up in my stirrups, and as I did so I saw two or three scattered horsemen go at the brook about a quarter of a mile below

where we stood. The first man got over, but the second I saw fall back into the brook, and with a struggle his horse scrambled out and raced almost alongside the first man, who made an ineffectual effort to catch his reins. I saw two men dismount and drag the unlucky drenched man from the brook, and as I did so a horrid fear seized me, for by the way they bent over him I could see he was badly hurt. One of the men apparently propped his head, and the other sprang on his horse and gallopped off in the direction of a cottage close by. I bade Mary remain where she was until I rejoined her, and started to the place; to my horror as I gallopped down my father's horse passed me riderless, and I knew that I was to find him by the brook. I cannot describe the feeling, I knew not if he was dead or dying or what, and I put spurs to my horse who, although laying himself out at racing speed, seemed to my impatient uncertain terror to be almost standing still. As I flung myself off I found my father supported by one of the members of the hunt who hurriedly told me to ride for the nearest doctor, as he feared my father was badly hurt, the horse having fallen on him and struck him in clearing himself.

I took my father's form in my arms and begged Davenport to go for the doctor. The man who had ridden to the cottage returned with a couple of labourers, and with their help he was laid upon a gate, which was taken from

its hinges and carried on our shoulders. We took him up to the farmhouse by the bridge upon which Mary and I stood when the accident occurred. He was unconscious, and, as far as I could judge, the horse must have rolled upon his right thigh, as the leg seemed powerless. On his head was a dark mark and I thought his unconsciousness was perhaps from this, but it was impossible to do more than guess, as I did not dare to lay a finger on him.

Davenport, the man who had gone for medical assistance, arrived shortly after, saying that he had fortunately found the doctor at home, and that he was only waiting to put together a few things necessary in the case of accidents, and would be there in a few minutes. Asking Davenport to take my place for a few minutes I ran down to see poor Mary, who had come to the house, dismounted, and was sitting in a tearful state of expectation in the front room, where the kind farmer's wife was doing her best to cheer her and keep her from imagining the worst. I did all I could to console her, and the brave girl at once dried her tears, and volunteered to wait until the doctor had given his verdict, after which she offered to ride home and break the news to my aunt and sister. It was arranged that Mr. Davenport was to escort her, and this settled I returned to my father's bedside to await the doctor's arrival. I had not long to wait, and after a careful examination he pronounced my father to be suffering from concussion

of the brain and a fracture of the right thigh, although I had foreseen that this was most probable I felt my heart sink, and it was with great misgivings that I begged Dr. Preston to tell me if my father was in great danger. He answered that it was impossible to say, but that my father's constitution being a fine one he had every hope. On no account was he to be moved from where he lay as absolute quiet was essential. He said that a proper nurse must be telegraphed for from London and that, as she could not arrive at earliest before 10 at night, it would be better if my aunt were sent for, and until the nurse arrived he would not leave the house. With this intelligence I went down to rejoin Mary, and she at once started for Brantingford in company with Davenport. It was with a very sad heart that I saw her ride off, her face, which had been so bright and happy but a short hour ago, now so pale and anxious. How sad an ending to the first glad day of our engagement! I could scarcely forbear from feeling that it was a bad omen. However I shook off such weakness and went back to the sickbed, feeling thankful that come what might I had won the love of a good true woman. The doctor stayed in the room watching for the first movement or sign of consciousness in my father, but none came and the minutes seemed like hours. At length I heard the sound of wheels in the yard, and gently slipping out of the room I ran down to meet my aunt. The sight of her poor face, all

drawn with misery and fear, and the half dried tearstains, overcame me more than I care to own, but, as I saw her grief was as great as mine, and her capability to bear it less, I felt bound to do all I could to reassure her.

"He is not worse, dear Aunt Dorothy, but still unconscious, come and see Dr. Preston who will tell you all."

I led her into the front room where Mary had sat, and went back to the doctor begging him to go and do all he could to reassure my aunt, in the meantime I would watch by my father until his return, when I would go down again and hear all my aunt's account of how the news had reached them. I was also anxious to tell her of the great joy that had befallen me that day, and which even the sad events of the last few hours could not entirely rob me of. As I stood by the bed with the apparently lifeless body of my father stretched out before me I could not help my thoughts running in a strain of sadness. Was this the end of all things, to be senseless clay, helpless and alone, and was death to come to us all, to close the scene before the play of life was played out to our satisfaction? It could not be. This semblance of the last great change filled my thoughts with hope as well as fear. The inert frame that lay before me might by a small change of circumstances have been my body, but if it had, surely the purifying influence of the love newly sprung up in my heart, must have given an immortal-

ity to the Divine essence, called a soul, from which it drew its being. Could death from which there is no appeal have summoned my father, whom I had seen full of health and strength, albeit not a young man, and if it had was there nothing to follow? Was he to be thus hurried into a chasm of oblivion with no hereafter? There must come a solemn moment in every man's life, when he feels a presence beyond accounting for by human power, and such a one was this to me, and by a certain calm trust in something better than human intelligence can fathom, I was able to hope for my father's life and yet not fear his death, should he have now to deliver up his soul.

CHAPTER X.

AN INTERVAL OF PEACE.

The doctor reentered the room telling me he had given the best account he could to my aunt, and that she was very collected and hopeful, and also that if I wished to go down to arrange with her as to what to settle about the guests in the house, I could choose no better opportunity, for he would stay with my father and watch for the first sign of consciousness. The answer to his telegram had come informing us that the nurse from the London Hospital would arrive at the station at 10.45, so that one anxiety was off our minds. I immediately took advantage of the doctor's presence to resign my watch, and joined my aunt in the room below. I was pleased to see that her look of anxiety, and grief, had to a great extent lessened, thanks to the cheering words of Dr. Preston. I took a chair close to my aunt's for I did not wish to talk loud, for fear of disturbing my father in the room above should he awake to consciousness, which, as the Doctor had told me, might occur at any moment.

She knew that the nurse would arrive that night, and as the doctor had told her that absolute quiet was obligatory for my father, she was aware that her presence in the house where he lay would no be necessary when once the nurse was in the house. It was therefore settled that she should return to Brantingford at once, and arrange for the departure of the guests without further delay. It was clearly impossible for them to remain in the house, as in all probability it would be some time before my father could be taken back to Brantingford. Of course I intended to remain at the farmhouse where we now were until my father's condition permitted of removing him. Equally of course was it, that both my aunt and myself should feel sure that Lord Edgeworth and Mary Ravenhill would decide to stay, until my father's recovery was either secure, or if it must be so, until the last tribute had to be paid to his memory. It was when we spoke of this that I told my aunt of the engagement that Mary and I had entered into that morning, and it was with tears in her eyes that the dear old lady threw her arms round my neck, and gave me the best wishes of her kindly heart.

"My dear boy," said she in a shaking voice, "it seems too sad that, owing to this terrible accident, your new found happiness cannot meet with the heartfelt congratulations of us all. What joy would it have given your father to have been the first to take your hand and wish you

happiness. But my trust in God's goodness is too great, dear Val, to think that your great joy is to be overshadowed by such irrevocable sorrow as your poor father's death would cause, and we must pray for the day to come soon when he will be able to share our pleasure."

I felt a lump rise in my throat as I returned her kiss and, thanking her for her kind words, echoed her wish for my father's recovery.

"Will you, dear Aunt Dorothy," said I trying to control the emotion I felt from becoming apparent in my voice, "do one thing for me? Go to my uncle and tell him that, as I cannot leave my father's bedside to ask his consent and approval myself, I have begged you to speak to him on my behalf. He will, I am sure, send a message to me, or bring it himself as soon as he can. Tell him how absolutely and devotedly attached I am to Mary, and beg him to believe that, if he entrusts her to my care, I can have no greater joy in life than to strive for her happiness."

It was with the tears now coursing down her cheeks that she kissed me again silently and, though she could find no words to assure me of her partizanship, I felt sure she would plead my cause as well as I could myself. I called the carriage again to the house and saw her drive off, as I turned my anxious steps again to my father's room.

All was quiet and the same state of unconsciousness

brooded over the injured man, and there was no course but to keep the same close unremitting watch over him. I looked at my watch and saw that some three hours must elapse before the arrival of the nurse from London, and as there was nothing for me to do I sat down on a chair, and gave way to all the thoughts which were seething in my brain. The hours were like lead and crept on as if they were years, and a quotation rang in my head 'the swift, sweet hours that bring us all things good and the slow, sad hours that bring us all things ill' or words to this effect; for I was not one of those to whom all the sounding sentences of the poets are familiar. But this idea appealed to me, for how short and swift had been the hours when the joy of my love for Mary had the undivided possession of me, and how sad and slow were these of my uncertainty of my father's life or death. At last the nurse came and a weight seemed lifted off me, for I had felt so helpless, not knowing in what way to assist should I be called upon to do so, and somehow the presence of a person trained to know at one glance what should be done to relieve pain, or assist medical science, seemed to renew hope in me.

When the nurse had come in, after a very short time spent in preparation and a meal, finally prepared for the sickroom, neatly dressed in white apron and cap, with her calm gentle face and self-reliant manner, I felt more

at ease, and had time to remember that no food had passed my lips for hours. It is strange how, when the first strain of anxiety is lifted from one, the first thing to make itself felt is hunger, but such is often the case and it was so with me. I went down and found the good wife most sympathetic, and in an incredibly short time I found myself appeasing the pangs of hunger with some very good home-made bread, cold beef and a tankard of beer cool and frothing from the stoneware jug.

I rose from the homely repast sensibly refreshed in mind as well as body, for the mind is dependent, to a greater degree than one cares to own, upon the proper nourishment of the more material part of the human constitution, and I went up to enquire what had occurred in the sick room, feeling much more hopeful as I entered. Opening the door gently but without knocking, I saw both nurse and doctor bending over the bed. By a sign from the doctor I stopped, awaiting permission to approach. When I did so I saw that my father's eyes were opened, but he did not move nor recognise anyone, a glance at the face of the doctor showed me that this was not a sign of increased danger, and so I waited patiently till the doctor turned from the room, and motioned me to follow him. He did not speak until we both stood in the room downstairs, when closing the door carefully as if to prevent a sound from issuing he said:

"I have given every instruction to the nurse, Mr. Valentine, and I am happy to tell you that, as far as I can see, the symptoms are favourable. Mr. Trentham has partially regained consciousness, although he cannot recognise anyone, nor will he do so for some days. Everything now depends upon absolute quiet and unremitting care and, as this is too hard a task for one woman to perform, I am going now to telegraph to the Hospital for a second nurse. This telegram will be despatched the first thing to-morrow, and she will arrive by the midday train, in the meantime will you see the people of the house, and make all arrangements as to absolute silence in the house. If there are children they must be sent away, as any shock to the nerves or irritation to the patient's brain, such as noise could occasion, might be fatal. If you will settle all this, I will go home, and fetch a few necessaries for the night for myself, and what I want for my patient, as I intend to spend the night here."

We separated thus and I, by the time he returned, had made all the necessary arrangements with the people of the house, and went up to a bed which had been made ready for me where I lay down and, with promise that the nurse or doctor should call me should anything happen, fell into a deep sleep.

I never moved untill I felt a hand laid upon me, when I sprang up in bed with all the fears of the night before

awaking with renewed force. So sound had been my slumber that I imagined I had not slept for an hour, and this was Dr. Preston come to summon me to my father's bedside. When I was thoroughly in possession of my senses, I became aware that it was Gerry who was standing by my bed, her usually merry face rather graver than usual, but still it was reassuring to see her.

"Are you very surprised to see me, Val?" said she, "I hope I didn't startle you very much, but I was so anxious to know how Father was, that I got up and drove over early to hear the news. It is half past nine, so I asked where you were sleeping, and came to you as I didn't like to disturb the doctor."

I looked at my watch and sure enough it was half past nine, and I had been sleeping since a little after midnight. It was a good sign that no one had been to call me, so my spirits rose as I said:

"Well, I will go at once and see the Doctor, if you go down to the sitting room I will dress in a few minutes, and come and tell you the news."

My sister turned as she left the room saying, "By the way, Val, I brought over a portmanteau for you with some clothes as I knew you had only your hunting things, so I will send it up to you."

How different I felt after a good night's rest, and the kind thoughtfulness of my sister, in bringing me a change

of clothes, added considerably to my material comfort. I dressed hurriedly and went to find the doctor who gave me a more hopeful account, saying that humanly speaking he felt no further anxiety for my father's life, but that his recovery must be of necessity a slow one, and that for many days to come everything depended upon quiet and good nursing, but that, as these two adjuncts were provided for, he thought we all might anticipate the best results. With this cheerful news I went to join Gerry, and both of us almost recovered the natural flow of our spirits from that moment. As soon as she had heard this she kissed me joyfully, and congratulated me with all her heart upon my engagement.

"This is too nice, Val, and the only thing to make us all happy now is to share the pleasure with Father. I know Uncle Edgeworth is pleased, for Aunt Dorothy told me so before she went to bed last night, and he is going to ride over here to-day to tell you so. Now sit down and eat something, and I will talk while you do so."

I was not sorry to eat, for with the renewed hope had come a healthy appetite, and the good people of the house had provided me with a breakfast of bacon and eggs, to which I did ample justice.

"You know, Val, that when Aunt Dorothy got home yesterday evening it was settled that everyone was to leave to-day, except Uncle Edgeworth and Mary who of course

stay. And I can't tell you how glad I am that that horrid Mrs. De Mora is to leave. The girl is lovely, but there is something about her mother that makes my blood run cold. It is such a relief to think that the house will be clear of them all by this evening."

I laughed at Gerry's feeling about Mrs. De Mora, for now that I had my own happiness to occupy my mind, I was selfish enough to have lost a good deal of my anxiety about Jack and his concerns, and I did not think it necessary to tell her what I had discovered about the mysterious lady. The time passed in chatting until nearly eleven when I saw my uncle ride up, and getting off his horse come towards the house. Gerry with the ready tact of all unselfish hearts disappeared, knowing that my uncle and I would have things to say better said in the confidence of a tête à tête interview. Our meeting was a silent one, and he held out his hand and grasped mine kindly in his, laying the other on my shoulder, and in the short silence that ensued I think both he and I felt that words were superfluous. At last with a kind look in his eyes, that were dimmed with a tender dew of which no good strong man need be ashamed, he said,

"Val, if you feel as proud and happy as I did, some twenty five years ago when I asked for the great gift of your father's sister for my wife, you are lucky, and if you are as determined to live for the welfare and happiness of

Mary, as I was for that of her dear mother, I could not give her into better hands. She is worthy of a good man's love, Val, and I think she will get it from you."

I felt at that moment such a rush of tender feeling fill me from head to foot, that it was with an effort I could steady my voice, to thank him in what I knew were painfully inadequate words, but if ever a heart was full of joy and gratitude mine was.

"I will try and be all that you could wish me to be for her sake and yours, uncle," stammered I lamely, but I think he knew that however bald the words were, that they lacked nothing save the mode of expression, and could only be genuine. Neither he nor I alluded to the subject again that day but there was, I think, a really happy contended feeling of redoubled affection, and confidence in us both from that moment. We talked of many things, and when Gerry rejoined us which she did in a short time, we discussed the unlucky accident, including the reassuring opinion of the doctor, and made plans for conveying my father back to Brantingford as soon as possible.

The weeks that followed this were quiet and uneventful enough, and there is nothing to chronicle in them as they rolled by. All that is necessary for the present history is to tell, that in the course of time my father recovered sufficiently to be removed to Brantingford, in about ten days from the time of the accident. He recovered slowly

and as time wore on, from days to weeks, it became apparent to us all that, although he would get well and strong, he could never quite regain the activity of former years, nor was it to be expected that he should, and I think that he did not mind the feeling that, henceforth he must resign himself to following the hounds upon a steady old hunter, and give up the place he had held in the first rank since he was five and twenty. He did not seem so ill content to retire upon the laurels he had won and worn so long, as we all thought probable; and even if it was a disappointment to him, he was of too brave and unselfish a nature to allow it to be perceived by the anxious and loving eyes of his sister and daughter.

Uneventful as these weeks were, I always look upon them as some of the very happiest of my life, for my uncle and Mary remained in the house, and I spent most of the time that I did not devote to my father, in the society of the woman I loved with an intensity that can but be increased by daily companionship. Every day and hour displayed some fresh charm in her for my eyes, and the true worth and loveablenes of her character became more and more engraved upon my heart. It was settled that our marriage was not only desired by the principal parties concerned, viz. Mary and myself, but by all the family, and as there was no just cause or impediment to it, we decided not to make ours a long engagement but become man and wife

the ensuing spring. It will be shown by the events that followed how, although it is simple to propose a course of action, it is astonishing how easily such plans may be disposed of by circumstances.

It may well be imagined that, absorbed as I was in my own well being and happiness, I had allowed Jack Darnley and his affairs to slip out of my mind. Love is selfish, outside of the interests of the beloved object, let the believers in the universal charity engendered by the sentiment say what they will, and mine occupied me to the exclusion of my friend's interests, and to tell the truth I had hardly given a thought to the De Moras since the hasty dispersing of the party some weeks previously.

Naturally, as I had a high opinion of Mary's judgment in social matters, I had asked her opinion of Mrs. De Mora, but this had been before our engagement, and since then, when I had told Jack that I could not interfere with his affairs, (seeing my signal insuccess when I told him of the midnight raid upon his room), I had allowed the subject to drop out of my mind. Neither had I thought it necessary to tell Mary of the matter as it did not concern either her happiness or mine. This was the state of things then at Brantingford at the beginning of the New Year. No communications had passed between Jack and myself during the time since the past November, when he had left the house with his fiancée and her mother, beyond the exchange

of a letter or two of no importance. I had written and told him of my engagement, and he had answered in the affectionate style that had been common to us both from our old school days, congratulating me warmly, and beyond some joking allusion, as to whichever remaining untied up the longest seeing the other sacrificed at the Hymeneal altar, nothing was mentioned of his coming marriage.

On coming down to breakfast one morning about the middle of January, I found a letter lying on the table in Jack's well known writing. Opening it I found it to contain matter for consideration, and short as it was, it gave rise to a good deal of thought and conjecture to our party.

"Dear Val," it ran, "I have had every intention of beating you in the race for a wife, and I shall get past the post first now. It is all fixed for next week, so you must give up all idea of getting spliced first, and come and be my best man. I have the licence, like the hero of a play always says, and, when she has bought the last yard of lace and row of pins, nothing remains to prevent Juanita from marrying. It is next Thursday at St. Austin's, which is near the Grand Hotel where Mrs. De Mora is staying. Come up to town as soon as you can, and write me a line to say you will see the last ashes of my bachelorhood laid to rest at the foot of the altar.

Yours ever

J. Darnley."

My father seemed a bit put out by this piece of news and was all for my refusing Jack's request, but I could not make up my mind to decline, and also I was anxious to see how Mrs. De Mora comported herself, and find out what that lady intended to do when she had finally handed her daughter over to Jack's keeping.

I therefore wrote to him telling him I would join him a couple of days before the wedding. I thought this was time enough, and also I grudged a longer time to be away from the place where Mary would be. Jack had told me that as the De Mora's had few acquaintances in London the wedding would be a quiet one, but this pleased him the better, as there would be nothing to do but to pack off as soon as his wife had got out of her wedding garment. They had determined, he also told me, that as the weather was not of the most cheerful in England at this time of year, to go to Grenada for a little while, returning for the season to London, where he had given orders to have his house done up and refurnished to receive his bride.

He was altogether in a most contented and jubilant frame of mind, and as I had now sympathy with the pride and expectation of a lover, I forbore to scoff in any way at his evident happiness and superabundant way of expressing it. The guesses as to Jack's future, and the topics afforded by his nearly approaching marriage, gave me the oppor-

tunity for many happy talks, of what might be in store for Mary and me, during our frequent walks together in the woods, where, even in the coldest wind, there were so many sheltered spots for a pair of lovers: and was not this happiness enough for me?

CHAPTER XI.

WHY WAS SHE SENT ACROSS MY PATH?

I went up to London, according to my word, two days before the wedding, and found Jack in a great state of excitement and happiness. I asked him of course if he knew what was to become of Mrs. De Mora after the wedding, and, equally of course, he said he neither knew nor cared. It was enough for him to secure Juanita, and although he had arranged every plan for himself and her to a nicety, he had not troubled his head with those of her mother. My curiosity prevented me from keeping altogether silent upon the question of money, so in spite of a misgiving as to how Jack would regard any enquiry upon the subject, I questioned him. "Have you found out, Jack," said I as we dined together at the Club on the last evening of his bachelorhood, "if Mrs. De Mora has a sufficient income to keep her from pitching her tent with you when you settle down?" Jack looked, as I had anticipated, slightly annoyed at my allusion to the old vexed question, but he answered with only slight hesitation.

"I have found out nothing, and to tell you the truth I have not tried to do so. However you need not be in any anxiety, for I have told Juanita that to-morrow morning she will be absolute mistress of £40,000, as the deed of gift is finished, and signed ready to be given into her hands when we return from St. Austin's. So that she can feel no discomfort in having to reinvest, or if she should wish to hand over any of it for her mother's use, and feel shy about telling me so, I have told Fenton to place the sum in ready cash at her mother's bankers early to-morrow morning. It may amuse the old lady to invest it whilst her daughter is away, or she can confiscate it altogether if she likes, so long as she does not trouble us with her presence."

"What a reckless fellow you are, Jack, fancy Fenton allowing you to do such an unheard of thing," I remarked in astonishment at hearing how large a price he had paid for his fancy without a murmur, for I felt pretty sure that he would never hear of his money again. A very determined look came on his face, and a light in his eyes that boded no good to the man who should gainsay him, as he answered.

"I should like to see the man who would refuse to do what I tell him unless he had the right to do so."

This was all the information I could get, and with it I had to be satisfied, for the conversation flowed in other

channels and I knew Jack too well to attempt to extract from him anything which he did not impart willingly. We parted pretty late that night, and I went to my room, promising to meet Jack the next day at breakfast, and go with him to the Church.

I found him the next morning in high spirits, a little nervous of course, as I suppose all, even the most impatient lover must be, about the ceremony, but not forgetting a single detail of his plans for leaving by the continental train of that evening. He settled everything with his servant directing him as to his portmanteaus and his bride's boxes, which the man was to fetch with the maid from the Grand Hotel, and go down the station at Victoria to await his arrival with his wife. He had ordered a carriage to be locked up for him to Dover, and giving his servant his card to show to the station inspector, told him to put the rugs, bags, etc. in and wait till he came. The last instructions given we at last jumped into the carriage and were off to St. Austin's. At the door of the Church were the Grahams, both of whose daughters, being the only lady acquaintances of the bride, had consented to be her bridesmaids, and one or two other friends of Jack's, but naturally there were few people present, besides the usual lookers on who always seem to be at every London wedding, and who turn up from every corner, no one knows how, directly a wedding favour or a white lace veil appears. He and I stood there,

feeling I suppose about as foolish as most men do under the circumstances, the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, and the butt for a feeble witticism or two from a stray gutter boy and girl, who watched us leave our carriage to enter the doors. We had not long to wait and a very short time after two carriages drove up, very closely following each other, the first containing Mrs. De Mora and her daughter, and the second the bridesmaids, two Miss Grahams. Juanita De Mora looked startlingly lovely in the rich creamy white dress, with the diamonds peeping out like dewdrops from the orange flowers and filmy lace which surrounded her. Her face was pale and in her eyes was a sad frightened look which I had certainly never seen before, and I felt a thrill of discomfort run through me about the whole thing. She however put her hand upon Jack's arm, and as they went up the nave of the church one could not wish to see a handsomer couple. My apprehensions were certainly not lessened when I caught sight of Mrs. De Mora. This lady was arrayed in a beautiful dress of some rich silver grey material mixed with shining plush and lace. It was not her dress that attracted my attention, striking as it was, but her expression. Far from looking sad, or moved at the near prospect of separation from her daughter, her face wore a look of ill disguised triumph. Her black eyes seemed to shine with a deep fire, and her thin lips were curled, showing the square

white teeth in a smile that made my blood run chill in my veins. I could hardly take my eyes off this curiously repulsive face, yet she fascinated me, as a snake might have done, during the service, and as she almost strode up and put her daughter's hand in Jack's, in answer to the question "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" a strong shudder ran through me, and I could not shake off the sensation of disgust she aroused in me at that moment. At last much to my relief the organ pealed out, and these two were finally joined together for no man to put asunder. After the usual forms had been gone through, all of us who had been invited to do so, went back to the Hotel, where we were to lunch, after which ceremony there would be left a sufficient time for the bride to don her travelling dress and catch the train for Paris that afternoon. The luncheon was much what it would be expected such a thing might be, and all the guests, but few in number, made all the haste they could consistent with good manners, to take their departure. At last no one was left but the Grahams, who of course in their character of bridesmaids could not leave before the departure of the bride, nor did their father and mother. Jack took an opportunity to give the deed of gift, done up in an envelope, into his newly made wife's hand, with such a proud and happy look, just before she left the room with her mother for the purpose of getting ready for her

journey. Thus Jack and I found ourselves alone with the Graham family and we, upon consulting them, found they coincided with our opinion that Jack should go with me, to see that his servant had fulfilled all his instructions to the letter, for which there would be ample time before the ladies reappeared. We saw that all was right, and Jack's servant came in very good time and drove off in company with the sedate looking maid, who took the trunks and paraphernalia of her mistress to Victoria Station. This done we rejoined the small party in the room upstairs, and strove manfully to entertain each other as well as we could. I saw poor Jack looking once or twice at his watch, as the time went but slowly, and he was naturally impatient. At last a waiter came in and announced that Mr. Darnley's carriage was at the door, whereupon he sprang up with an alacrity that would have been most wounding to the vanity of his companions, had not they felt that all was excusable in a man starting on his wedding tour. He told the man to let Mrs. De Mora and, with almost a blush, he added "Mrs. Darnley" know, and stood in agitated expectation at the door. Some five minutes passed, during which I, and I daresay I was no exception, felt utterly uncomfortable and impatient. At last with a sigh of relief we saw the man coming, but his face was so odd and he looked so frightened that I pushed past Jack, and going to meet him in the passage, said in a low voice, "Is anything the matter,

out with it if there is, I will call Mr. Darnley and tell him."

"Yes, sir," stammered the man, "I can't find the ladies and there's no one in their rooms the chambermaid says."

"Nonsense," said I hurriedly and called Jack, begging him to come with me to see the manager of the hotel, as the waiter could not find the ladies.

"Infernal idiot," muttered Jack to the man as we passed the miserable waiter, "we shall miss the train by your cursed folly."

Arriving at the manager's room, we found him in conclave with the housemaid, and he came up bowing civilly and said.

"I am very sorry, Sir, but I fear something is wrong, the chambermaid says the ladies have left some time, sir, and they left the money for their bill with her. Here it is," he continued, showing the bill and the money on the desk.

"Damn it all, this is a mistake," cried Jack in a frenzy of impatience, "these can't be the ladies I want, and your blundering stupidity will lose me the train. Come up and show me the rooms," he added, "and you come with me Val."

Not one minute was lost, and we hurried up to the rooms supposed to have been occupied by Mrs. De Mora and her daughter. Jack forgetting everything in his anger and fear burst open the door, and I shall never forget the groan that came from his lips, as his eye fell upon the scene within.

There on the bed in disorder lay the cream white dress and lace veil worn by his wife; and her bouquet of orange flowers was tossed on one side and lay on the floor. He kicked it roughly as he went through the open door between this room and the next, to see if by any chance the ladies were there. He turned back and faced me pale as death, and in a choked husky voice said,

"It's true, Val, they are gone. For God's sake go down to those people and tell them to go, and then rejoin me here and we can settle what to do. Leave me here," he said almost savagely to the people of the hotel, who withdrew hurriedly, seeing that there was nothing for them to do, and preferring to avoid a man as desperate as Jack looked.

I got down to the rooms where the Grahams still stood, and I never knew how I told them of what had happened or in what words, but with the instinct of well born people they forbore to question me, whatever their feelings of curiosity may have been, and in the course of five minutes I had shut the door of their carriage, and seen them drive off. I hurried back at once to my poor friend and opening the door to rejoin him, I almost drew back when I caught sight of him, so wretched was the scene before me.

He stood there with clutched in his hand, a part of the dress which but an hour before had clothed the woman who had deceived him, and he proceeded deliberately to tear it in rags, with a concentrated look of fury and pain in his

white face, terrible to behold. The material was strong, but his hands were muscular and as the strong silk ripped into long fragments and fell at his feet, he trampled them heavily. The peculiar sound of the tearing silk was almost like a cry, and seemed to be a kind of relief to the feelings of the poor fellow half maddened by grief and rage. I summoned up all my courage to break in upon this wretched sight with words, and said "Come with me, old fellow, this is no place for you, come to my rooms and we can discuss what is to be done." He flung the last fragment of the filmy lace, that had hung to his coat sleeve, from him as if it had been some venomous reptile, and turned to me.

"You are right, Val," he said in a hard low voice, "this is over and my life is as hopelessly ruined as that finery, less frail and worthless than the woman who wore it. By God, I will be a man and pull myself together, and avenge myself for this cruel day's work," so saying he took his hat and left the room, walking on before me straight and strong, and we went back to my rooms in St. James's Place together. As we left the hotel I had suggested taking a hansom, but Jack said,

"No, let us walk, a little cold air will clear our brains."

When we got into the house I looked for a moment at Jack's face, and was astonished to see how it had become grave and set. He was very pale, but as calm and collected looking as if he were nerving himself to face some great

effort. I have often heard how the effect of some shock will turn the hair white in a few hours, and I confess to having had a kind of half acknowledged dread that this might have happened to him. I saw before me a man changed morally to a degree hardly possible to understand, and bearing the traces of the change in every look and gesture, but the shock seemed, instead of having harmed or reduced his power of action, to have increased it tenfold, and as he stood there I felt he was capable of more determined exertion, morally and physically, than he had ever been in his life. The person who had injured him would have had a sorry chance at that moment, had he been within reach of those muscular hands. As we walked into the room, I could not make up my mind what to say or do, to divert the poor fellow's thoughts from his misfortune or give him any comfort. The only thing I could think of at the moment was to offer him brandy and soda, for he looked worn and tired, and some stimulant could not do him any harm. I got it and poured him out a pretty stiff one, which he took mechanically and drank off without a word, as a man in a trance might, and then turning from me again he stood by the fire. I pushed up a chair and sat down, but he did not seat himself, and I saw he was thinking probably of how to best begin what he had in his mind.

"I suppose it is my own damned folly that I have to

thank for most of this," he said bitterly, "but it is hard to think there can be such fiends hidden under lovely faces. Why in God's name was this she-devil sent across my path to ruin me. It is buying my experience dearly, but it shows me my own folly and, bitter lesson as it is, I must make the best of it. I swear that I will find out the motive for this vile thing they have done. I suppose that lovely woman whom I trusted, was worse than the lowest woman of the streets, bloated and disfigured with drink and vice, for she has deliberately planned a refined cruelty to a man's soul. She had far better have killed me than deceive me as she did. I will find the man for whom she did it, for I suppose she has a lover, and he and I can reckon with each other. She at any rate is safe from personal vengeance, for she has the shape and outward form of a woman. However," he continued after a short pause during which he puffed at his cigar and I remained silent, "it is unmanly, and utterly useless, to brood over what is past mending, and all that is left for me now, is to bring to such an account as I can, those who have ruined me. It is a sad satisfaction, but my only one."

It was very sad to see this strong young fellow in the pride of his youth, barely over five and twenty, with his handsome face full of pain and disappointment, standing opposite to me saying that his life was ruined with such bitter hopelessness, but I felt that there was such a thing

as time, and as it was an universal panacea, it in all probability would bring healing on its wings even for such a wound as his; but this was not the opportunity for me to remind him of it, so I kept my philosophy to myself for the moment.

"I will help you as far as it is in my power, old fellow," I replied, "and you can rely upon me as you would on yourself, to sift this wretched story to the bottom. We have not been pals all these years for nothing, and you cannot draw too largely upon my good will for you."

He turned and grasped me by the hand. "Thank you, Val," he said in a low voice and rather unsteadily, "you will see me through, I know. Thank God you are the honest good fellow you are, and I can trust everything in your hands. Let us think now of the best thing to be done," he added in a quiet way, "and not waste time in any more foolish regrets." He took out his watch as he spoke, and went on. "It's not six yet, so we have time to go to Scotland Yard or wherever is the best place to get some one to look for these people. Oh, Val," he broke out, "the worst of all is to think that she is my wife, but it must be done."

Before I could answer I saw that he had flung himself down on a chair, and buried his head in his arms which rested on the table in front of him. His whole frame was shaken by bitter sobs of pain that he could no longer

control. His first heat of anger had given way to this, and I felt it was a storm through which he must pass, and I waited for it to be over, knowing the relief would be great to his overburdened feelings. I could not look at him, poor fellow, as I felt the tears rising in my own eyes, so I turned away on some shallow excuse, and waited till he had regained his self-possession saying, "Yes, I think we ought to lose no time, but a private detective would be better. I have seen advertisements of such men in the papers. Let us go to one of them." I took up the paper as I spoke, and looking up and down the columns at last found what I wanted, which set forth that "James Nowell of 16 Lancaster Chambers, Strand, specialist and expert in confidential investigations may be consulted daily at his offices as above. Despatch, secrecy, success, reliability and absolute integrity."

I read this out and added: "As there is no time to be lost in enquiries as to the best to employ, shall we go to this one at once, and see if he can do what we want."

Jack seemed anxious to go immediately, so putting on our coats and hats we left the house without delay, and taking a hansom, we ordered the man to drive to the address of the agent as given in the newspaper. I told the driver to go as fast as he could, for fear that the detective should have left his office, if we arrived later than six. Turning to Jack I begged him to ransack his

brain well so as to be able to give the clearest and amplest information he could to the man Nowell.

He answered me sadly enough: "That's just what I am trying to do, Val, but worse luck I begin to see now how little I ever did know about them. All I can think of now is the name of their bankers, where I ordered Fenton to pay in that money to-day and", here he hesitated, "I have her photograph in my pocket, that's all," he continued, "but perhaps this man may be used to such things, and bring more to my mind by questioning. I suppose I must make a clean breast of it and tell him all, but it's such an infernal thing to have to own that the woman I chose for my wife left me on my wedding day."

I felt more for him than ever, but my duty as a friend did not allow of my permitting any weakness on his part, so I said.

"Of course he must know the whole thing if he is to be of any use, and after all these sorts of fellows are always having ugly stories to hunt out, you must not have any false scruples."

We drove up to the house indicated, and upon enquiry found the rooms occupied by Nowell to be on the second floor, of the large block of buildings known as Lancaster Chambers. They were not in the Strand, as might have been supposed by the advertisement, but at the corner of one of the small streets, leading from that thoroughfare

to the river below. There was a bleak looking wall painted in a light colour, upon which was to be seen in big black letters a list of names, and it was by a perusal of this that we found "Mr. J. Nowell, Confidential Agent" lived upon the second floor. We went up the broad stone staircase, and upon reaching the second floor found an indicator upon the wall, informing visitors that certain numbers lay to the right of the long corridor, and others to the left. We accordingly bent our steps in the direction of No. 16, and by the aid of the gas-jets which were burning, not over brilliantly, found a door upon which was a brass plate bearing the name we were in search of, and saying the office hours were from 10 to 6. I looked at my watch and seeing it wanted still ten minutes to the last named hour I rang the bell. A boy came to the door and in answer to our enquiries said that Mr. Nowell was just leaving and could see no one that night. I told Jack to send his card in and pencil "important business" upon it, which he consigned to the boy, together with half a crown. A few seconds brought the boy back with a request that the gentlemen should "step this way" and we were ushered into the office for the execution of "confidential enquiry."

CHAPTER XII.

THE NUMBER ON THE LUGGAGE.

The room was well furnished, and the only trace of business about it was a large kneehole writing, table — with a well shaded gas-lamp over it, but the chairs were comfortable and the carpet thick. There were pictures on the walls, well chosen and well painted, and a bright fire burnt in the fire place, and upon the mantel-piece were some small bits of china, all good of their kind, in fact the room was more like the private room of the manager of an hotel, than an office for conducting unpleasant business.

Mr. Nowell rose from his seat as we entered the room and glancing at each of us bowed as he wished us good evening in a cheerful good humoured voice. He was a middle aged man, as unlike one's stock idea of a detective agent as could be. His genial highly coloured face looked the picture of health and good temper. His hair was white, but strange to say it did not make him look an old man, and served to bring into stronger contrast the ruddy complexion of the smoothly shaven face beneath

it. He had a shrewd pair of light grey eyes, and one could see after a few moments' conversation, that there was but little that could escape them. He asked us to be seated, and informed us that he was just about to leave his office when the card with the pencilled words induced him to receive us. He turned to Jack and continued in a genial full toned voice, "I am sure you will excuse me, sir, if I am making a mistake in supposing you to be Mr. Darnley whose business is important, but my professional eye seldom deceives me," he laughed pleasantly and went on, "in what way can I be of use to you?"

Jack started and flushed up to the roots of his hair whilst I mentally made a note of the man's accuracy of observation, for I, who knew him so well, had not noticed much difference in Jack's behaviour. He answered in a manly straightforward way, telling Nowell his sad tale without hiding a single incident. I saw the keen grey eyes of the agent fix themselves upon Jack's face, and he followed every detail with increasing interest. When Jack had told him all he could Nowell said:

"You will permit me, I am sure, to put a few questions to you, sir, in my profession one has many disagreeables; of which none are greater than to have to cause pain to a client, by being obliged to probe the innermost recesses of a wounded heart, but without it we cannot draw a just conclusion, and in your case it is necessary to know

every possible contingency. You have told me of the generosity of your provision for the lady you married, and the name of her mother's bankers, and furnished me with a photograph of the younger lady, excuse me, have you any cause to think that she left in company with anyone besides her mother?"

Jack winced and answered that he knew nothing, having met the lady for the first time in the summer, and had become engaged almost immediately, he therefore was unaware if there had been any man who could have induced her to leave him.

"Can you tell me, Mr. Darnley, if there was anything in the past history of either of these two ladies, which could account for their wishing to abscond hurriedly?"

"Nothing that I know of," answered Jack reflectively, "but as I told you I knew but little of them, and as they were to all appearance ladies of good means I took no pains to enquire. My income is large," he added, "and it did not matter to me if they were really rich or not, and I had no reason to suspect them in any way. My friend Mr. Trentham will tell you of something which he saw at his house, and to which I attached no importance at the time, but which I think may now be important for you to know. Will you tell Mr. Nowell, Val, of Mrs. De Mora's visit to my room at Brantingford?"

I proceeded to tell him, as accurately as I could, of

the scene I had been witness to, and he nodded his head gravely, giving it as his opinion that this visit must have had a serious bearing upon the subsequent events.

"You do not know of course, Mr. Darnley, if anyone in the hotel saw these ladies leave, so for the moment of course there is little to be done. I will set one or two experienced men to work, to enquire at the railway stations if any persons answering the descriptions have left London, and to-morrow we must enquire at the hotel, and at the bank, to see if the money placed there has been taken; and if so, in what manner and by whom. It is impossible to do more than this for the present, but you may rely upon the utmost vigilance and despatch on my part."

Of course this was a signal to us that it was already past the normal hour for closing the office; and we remained only long enough to give our names and addresses, and receive the promise from Nowell that he would keep us well informed of anything that might transpire in the meantime, begging us, in our turn, to tell him if anything new came under our observation.

There was nothing left for us but to go back to my rooms, and when once there I sat down and wrote a long letter to my father telling him of the whole affair, and another to Mary in which I told her that, much as I grudged the time I should be away, I could not leave Jack now in the first horror of his grief and anger, but that I should remain

with him for the present, and do all in my power to hunt out the secret of Juanita's flight. I promised to write continually to her and keep her well posted in the news. This done and both letters despatched, ensuring their delivery by the second post at Brantingford, I was free to think again of Jack. I guessed that after what had happened to him he would not feel inclined to go to his club and dine, so I went out to consult my landlady, whom I had known for years, and, being aware that upon occasions she could cook a little dinner, I begged her to do the best she could for us upon such short notice. She was fully equal to the occasion, and also suggested that after "the dreadful blow the poor dear gentleman had had, it would be cruel to leave him lonesome like," and begged me to send for his things and make him stay in the house, she had a spare room, and would go up at once and get it ready for him. This seemed to me a very good idea, as I had myself had some qualms about letting Jack go back to the solitude of his rooms, to face the silent looks, of mingled astonishment and respectful pity, he would see in his servants' well trained countenances.

Going back to the room I unfolded these plans to Jack, and was pleased to see a real look of pleasure and relief come over his face, as he said,

"Dear old Val, how kind and thoughtful of you. I dreaded positively having to show anywhere to-night, and

a nice quiet little dinner and evening with you is just what I like. Of course if you can put me up too it will be ever so much nicer, and if you think of remaining up in town for a time, it would be a great relief to me to stay here a bit; and we shall both be on the spot to consult together if anything turns up."

Jack's servant came and requested to see his master. He told us that he and the travelling maid, (who had entered Mrs. Darnley's service that day) finding that the newly married pair did not appear in time for the train, had both returned to Jack's house, and were awaiting further orders. Jack told them to remain where they were, until receiving fresh instructions, dismissed the man promptly not caring to enter into explanations.

We settled as we ate the homely little dinner together in my rooms, that he and I should remain where we were for the present. I confess that I did not tell him that the thought, which he felt so grateful for, of sharing my rooms, did not emanate from me but the motherly heart of my landlady. Men are sensitive when suffering from such a wound as his, and knowing that he was the object of pity from a stranger, however kind the way in which it was expressed, would not have soothed him just then, but rather served to irritate his wounded heart. The evening passed slowly enough, and poor Jack seemed in no humour to go to rest, and the night, one might almost

say the morning, was far advanced before he left me, to go to the solitude of the room prepared with such care for him. I was not sorry that he sat and talked with me long and gravely that night, as I knew it was better for him to expend the first sting of the wrong he had suffered in words, and I myself felt disinclined for sleep.

When we met at breakfast the next morning, Jack looked pale and worn, and was evidently desperately anxious for he first news that would come from Nowell. I persuaded him to wait in patience, as it was of no use going to Lancaster Chambers, until we got a notification that there was some news which would repay us for a journey there. He would not leave the house, in spite of my begging him to come out with me for some exercise and air, for fear that a letter might come whilst we were out. He also had a dread of meeting any of his acquaintances, and my heart melted towards him as he answered my suggestions of a walk by saying:

"I can't, Val, fancy if I met any fellow I know and he said, "Hullo, how is it you are not married, and off on your honeymoon, I thought it came off yesterday." In justice I was obliged to own such a thing was far from impossible, as most of his friends knew his wedding had been fixed for the previous day, so I humoured his wish to remain at home, and resigned myself to keeping an anxious vigil with him. The wind was tempered to this

shorn lamb however, and in a much shorter time than I expected, a man came bringing a short note from Nowell, requesting Jack to come down to Lancaster Chambers. Nowell excused himself for not coming himself, but he said that, as his office was advertised to be open from 10 to 6, he did not like to absent himself during business hours, and begged the favour of a visit from his client at 3 that afternoon, before which time he was engaged.

I was glad that it should be so, as I could by this means persuade Jack to take the air and exercise which I felt sure would brace his nerves, so I suggested we should walk down and eat some luncheon at a restaurant in the Strand, and then go on to Lancaster Chambers at the appointed time. Even Jack recognised that it was useless to go there before the time specified in Nowell's note, and consented to do as I proposed. He had, as was natural, no appetite, but I was glad to see that the walk had done him good, and he looked infinitely less miserable as we took our hats and left the restaurant, to walk to our destination, smoking our cigars as we did so. I hoped that when once he was in possession of even the faintest clue to the mystery he would be better, for it would give his mind some work, and anything I knew was preferable to the strain of expectation and uncertainty. It was with a positive feeling of relief that I rang the bell, and with hardly a moment's delay we found ourselves in the con-

fidential enquiry office. Even the fresh good humoured face of Mr. Nowell brought its item of comfort, and I think even Jack fel more easy than he had done for twenty-four hours. Nowell saved us all trouble by beginning the conversation himself in these words.

"I think we shall be very soon in a position to tell you where the ladies you are in search of may be found, Mr. Darnley. If you will allow me I will tell you, step by step, the progress we have already made in our investigations." He waited a moment as if expecting some answer from Jack, who was too agitated to speak, and simply nodded his head impatiently. The agent laying a large manuscript book before him on the table, as if for reference or verification, went on: "Last evening after your visit, I told one of our best men to make all enquiries at the continental railway stations, imagining them to be the most likely to be chosen for the escape of the persons we want. He gave me the information he had become possessed of, by enquiry from the station officials this morning, as soon as the mail and passenger trains for this forenoon had left the station. At the firstglance his discoveries seemed most unimportant. They amounted to this," and here he turned to the book before him, from which he proceeded to read the following extracts.

"'Left Victoria Station this day, Friday 28th Jan. 18— by 11 a.m. passenger train for Continent via Dover and Calais, lady and gentleman, lady answered the description

and resembled photograph.' You will remember, sir, that you left the photograph with me, and I handed it to the man employed, for the purpose of identification. 'No other lady appeared, and lady and gentleman started, travelling 1st class ticket to Paris. Sent on Short to watch their movevements, as the lady seems to be the one wanted. No trace of elder lady. Description of lady watched: Medium height. Golden hair, Slight figure. Fair complexion. Description of gentleman: Very dark hair and eyes. Clean shaven. Height about five feet 8 to 10 inches. Slight and rather thin, small feet and hands. Looked pale and anxious for train to leave station.'"

This finished he raised his eyes once more to Jack, and continued speaking. "I think there is little doubt that this lady is your wife, Mr. Darnley, but we have no trace of the elder lady. Now will you be so kind as to inform me if you wish to trace her too?"

"I want to find my wife," said Jack sternly, "and perhaps the best way will be not to waste time in looking for Mrs. De Mora at present. Have you no clue to her movements, it is very certain they left the hotel together?"

"For the present, Mr. Darnley, we can find absolutely no trace of Mrs. De Mora, who seems to have left her daughter in the charge of this man, and disappeared entirely. That is to say unless the lady who left for Paris was not the one you are in search of; which I think is unlikely.

However we have kept a strict watch upon her movements and those of the man with her; and one of our best men, Mr. Short, is under orders not to lose sight of them. In the meantime another man will do all he can to find the whereabouts of Mrs. De Mora."

Jack was very quiet and thoughtful during this explanation, and I saw that the idea that his wife was in company with an unknown man was a shock to him, for, however much he may have suspected it, he tried to fight against the certainty.

"I can't help thinking your man has been mistaken in taking the young lady you speak of for my wife. We have no evidence of any kind that she was even acquainted with a man in England, and I never heard either of the ladies mention anyone."

"I think I can give you some evidence that will prove their acquaintance with a man who was in England yesterday, and whom I shrewdly suspect to be the one who left for Paris this morning. I sent to the bank of which you furnished the address yesterday, and, as soon as I explained the nature of the business, the partner treated me with the greatest courtesy, and put every scrap of information in his possession at my disposal. This was not much, simply amounting to the fact that Mrs. De Mora had closed her account with the firm just before the house closed the previous evening, withdrawing a large amount

of money, consisting of a sum of £40,000: which had been placed to her account by Messrs. Fenton and Farebrother the same morning. I then begged him to ascertain, if possible, who had withdrawn the money, as I wanted to trace the movements of Mrs. De Mora on your behalf. He sent for the head cashier who, upon being questioned, told me, that at about ten minutes to four the previous day, a man had come into the bank, the bearer of a note in Mrs. De Mora's handwiriting, and signed by her, requesting that the remaining balance of her account might be handed over to her accredited messenger. This was naturally complied with, there being no discrepancy in the signature of the note or of the cheque enclosed in it. He described the man accurately; and the description tallied in every particular with that of the one accompanying Mrs. Darnley to Paris by the 11 a.m. train from Victoria. The money was paid partly in notes and gold, and the remainder in a letter of credit upon a well known firm in Paris, as demanded in Mrs. De Mora's letter of instructions. The numbers of the notes had been kept, as is usual when a large amount is paid out, and were given without any difficulty to Collins, the agent employed by me for the investigation. He, not being quite satisfied that he was correct in his recognition of the lady on her way to Paris, went back at once to Victoria Station, and asked the ticket clerk to furnish him with the numbers of any notes given

him that day, for payment of fares for the Continental lines. Upon comparing these, he found one of them to correspond with one of those furnished by Mrs. De Mora's bankers. Further enquiries showed that another note had been paid for the charges upon the luggage of some of the passengers leaving by the same train, and it also bore one of the notified numbers. The ticket clerk also described the person from whom, to the best of his recollection, he received the note, and this description also tallies, in most respects, with that of the man in question. A telegram has been despatched to the man Short, who has followed the suspected couple to Paris, and upon arrival he will ascertain if the number upon the luggage claimed by them, is identical with that given to the person who gave the note, numbered with one of the numbers in the banker's list. This telegram will reach us this evening, and then we can have no longer any doubt. In the meantime I think you will own, Mr. Darnley, that the chain of evidence is pretty complete, and only wants the number upon the registered luggage to coincide with that given by the registering clerk at Victoria, to be conclusive." He paused and looked supremely satisfied with himself, and I acknowledge that I for my part was convinced that he was upon the right track, but Jack was as hard to persuade, and his mind wanted proofs as strong as Thomas Didymus, and he questioned Nowell yet again.

"Are the numbers kept of all registered luggage; and are

you in possession of the number upon that paid for by the note recognised?"

"The number of the luggage is written in a book provided for the purpose, and has to be kept with the utmost precision, as it has to be verified by the French companies, over whose lines the traffic passes, at stated times in the year," replied Nowell, with the assurance of a man who knows the subject upon which he speaks, "and the number is 98 according to the register book."

Again Jack cavilled at his proofs. "If this is so, how is it sure that the notes can be produced to prove that they are of the numbers signalised?"

"I have provided for this, sir," he answered calmly, "and, by the kindness of the Manager, I have arranged that these notes shall be kept on one side, with a witnessed account from the two clerks of how they came into their possession, this I did by replacing them by two others, to be placed in the cash boxes belonging to the different departments, and the two in question are at this moment in the fireproof safe in the Continental Manager's room at Victoria, together with a detailed account, taken by the Manager himself, from the lips of the two clerks, of the way they came into their possession. I hope, Mr. Darnley, you are satisfied that I have tried my best to leave no detail unexamined in your case. Is there any other precaution you can suggest?" This he added with the proud con-

sciousness of a man who stands above contradiction or advice.

"I suppose then," replied Jack, "there is nothing to be done, until the telegram is received to confirm or disprove the identity of the number of the luggage your agent is watching, or if it is only that of a couple travelling by the same train. Kindly let me know at once at 71 St. James's Place, the moment you receive it, and in the meantime, let the man you have employed to search for traces of Mrs. De Mora in England keep his eyes open. Money is no object to me, so do not neglect anything on the score of expense."

"I understand this very well, Sir," remarked Nowell, "and you may be sure that, if energy and money combined can be successful, this mystery shall be fathomed."

This was the end of our interview for that afternoon, and Jack and I left the office, and returned to my rooms to discuss what our plans should be if the telegram came from Paris, the result of which was to prove or disprove, in all probability, the identity of the lady who left Victoria with Juanita: which was what the agent was so confident it would do.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUCH THINGS ARE FORBIDDEN BY THE LAW OF MAN AND GOD.

Our return journey to St. James's Place was a silent one. I was turning over all Nowell had said in my brain, and no doubt Jack's mind was occupied in a similar manner, as he did not speak to me until we were once more installed in comfortable chairs in my rooms. He began by referring bitterly to the fact, that there could hardly be a doubt now, of his wife having left him with some man.

"You see, Val, although I fought Nowell's opinion as long as I could, I can't refuse to see that there must probably be truth in his evidence. But who is the man? Do you think there can be any hope still that she is not the basest of the base?"

"I can't venture an opinion as yet," I replied, "but of course there is a possibility still of one explanation, that would be less wounding to you, than if the man she went with was her lover."

"What can you have thought of, Val," said Jack eagerly,

"don't be enigmatic, but tell me now, I am so desperately anxious."

"Well," said I slowly, for I wanted to choose the best way I could to tell him what might possibly be, although in my own mind I did not think it probable, and dreaded to raise false hopes in his mind which, if they were dashed to the ground, might but increase his grief, "of course it might be possible that the man she has gone with is her brother. Mind you, I don't say it is likely, but there is just a chance. Suppose that she had a brother, and he was a bad lot of whom she was thoroughly ashamed, and he, having heard of the prize she had secured, turned up and demanded his share of the booty, threatening to appear and put you and her to shame if he did not get what he wanted. She might have feared an exposure of his delinquencies, and to save the disgrace gone away with him. Women are weak and can be frightened into all kind of follies."

"How could she do that if she loved me, Val," said Jack sadly, "why she, on the face of it, must have trusted me since I had never asked her a single question. If she had thought of me, and how I loved her, she would have told me of any disgrace that was not of her own making, being sure that my love for her would have been great enough to share it, and forgive it, for her sake."

He was right; and I knew that it was useless to try and

give him comfort with such an unlikely hypothesis, so I changed the subject, and asked him what he intended to do, if the couple in the train who were being watched by the man Short, seemed likely to have anything to do with him, and his wrongs.

"If they turn out to be Juanita, and the man whose description Nowell gave us, we must follow them, Jack," he answered, "will you come with me to Paris, or wherever their destination may be, that is to say," he added, "if it is not South America, or somewhere which would take you too far away from Lady Mary?"

This was the first time he had mentioned Mary's name, and I felt almost ashamed of my happiness in the contemplation of such a sorrow as his, and I determined to go with him, and even if it should postpone my own marriage, I would not desert him in his dire necessity. He was almost a brother to me, and I could not let him go to face the misery of his situation without my support, for I knew him to be too proud to confide his sorrows to any but his nearest friend, which position I myself occupied.

"I will go with you wherever you like, my dear boy," said I warmly, "but, if it can be managed, I should like just to run down to Brantingford to say good bye to Mary before I start."

It was agreed between us that if we saw any necessity, upon receiving more news from Nowell, we should both

start abroad, and that I was to go down the following evening to my father's house, and bid farewell for a time to my fiancée, whom I knew to be too unselfish to murmur at my decision: indeed I felt sure she would urge me, in the tenderness of her heart for all those 'afflicted in mind, body or estate' to use every effort, and sacrifice every wish of my own, and hers, to benefit a suffering fellow creature. The next morning there was no news from Nowell, with the exception of a short note saying that the detective Short telegraphed from Paris, to the effect that as the information he was in possession of was too long for transmission by wire, he had written full details by post. This letter Nowell informed us could not arrive before the evening post of that day, at earliest, and fixed an hour for Jack to come to his office the next day. Being Saturday, this would enable us to leave London on Sunday morning, he said, should we decide it to be necessary. I therefore went off to Brantingford that day by an early train, promising to return the next one in time to go to Lancaster Chambers. It is needless to say with what mingled curiosity and sympathy I was greeted, the former feeling being for my story, and the latter for Jack's misfortune. I told them all that I knew, and what the detective had already discovered, and how I anticipated having to start at once for the continent, upon the track of the guilty couple, in company with Jack. I was not mistaken in thinking that Mary would

do all she could to induce me to make every effort to lighten Jack's sorrow, and share the trials and anxieties of his position, and it was but a fresh evidence of her pure, and unselfish nature in my eyes, to find her forgetful of even our joint pleasure in each other's company, when an occasion arose and the lightening of another's burden was possible, by such a sacrifice. My time was limited at Brantingford, and I spent as much of it as I could in Mary's company, and there is nothing that is worth recording during the day and night I was there. My family were all anxiety for the smallest item of news, and it was with repeated promises to write often and explicitly, that I at last got into the dogcart, in which I drove to the station with Mary, who accompanied me so far on my return journey. Our parting was not a prolonged one, as the train was punctual, and with every intention of returning very shortly, I jumped into the railway carriage, renewing my promises to write and tell all the news as soon as there was any. When I arrived in London I drove to St. James's Place, where I found Jack awaiting me, and we at once started, to pursue the old plan of two days before, and lunch in the Strand on our way to the agent's office.

Jack, during my flying visit to Brantingford, had got everything in order in case of having to make a hurried start to the Continent. He had even been down to his banker's, and provided himself with large letters of credit

upon firms in several foreign cities, which he thought it possible might be useful if our chase was a long one, and he had been to have a long interview with his lawyer. This latter, he informed me, was to arrange all the preliminaries for releasing himself from his wife, should he discover her to have left him with a lover, and his man of business could commence the suit upon receipt of a telegram from Jack. I was astonished at such forethought on the part of one, whom I had known from a boy to have one of the least calculating of natures, but I suppose a blow, such as he had received, had stunned his heart and awakened bitter activity in his brain for the sake of revenging his wrongs. However it was just as well that all should be methodically arranged, and however astonished I might be at Jack being the one to have thought of all this, I could not help being glad that he had left no contingency unprepared for. We accordingly went again to the now familiar rooms to interview Nowell, and Jack remarked as we went up the broad stone staircase:

"I hope we shall soon have made our last visit to this place, Val, and turn over this dark page in my history never to speak of it again."

I heartily echoed his wish, and in a few seconds we found ourselves in the office, which seemed as if nothing had changed since our last visit. There sat Nowell, in the precise attitude of two days before, with his book of refe-

rence and his stacks of neatly arranged papers, and one felt as if one might have been asleep for a few hours, and awoke in the same place after a dream-haunted slumber. Nowell rose from his chair bowing, and after a few words of greeting, went straight to the business we had in hand.

"I am in receipt of the letter from Short written in Paris, Mr. Darnley, and perhaps I cannot do better than read it to you, we can then discuss anything that may occur to your mind afterwards, do you agree to this plan?"

Jack acquiesced at once, and Nowell, taking a letter from one of the piles in front of him, proceeded to read as follows: —

"'Paris, Friday, 29th Jan. 18—.

Dear Sir.

According to instructions received, I have not left the track of the lady and gentleman, signalised by Mr. Collins this morning at Victoria Station, passengers to Paris. Your telegram to hand, with instructions to verify the number upon the luggage belonging to the suspected couple. Upon arrival in Paris, Gare du Nord, I was enabled, owing to having personally no luggage, to closely watch their movements, and to leave the station unobserved close upon their steps. The number upon the luggage is 98, registered from Victoria. Following the conveyance they

took from the station I traced them to the Hotel du Louvre, where they occupy a room on the first floor. They have given the names of Señor and Señora Saragas from London. Up to the present hour there is no farther intelligence, but I will communicate by wire early to-morrow. There seems a strange air of security about them, which makes me sometimes doubt if Collins was not mistaken in his identification, but, until further orders, I shall continue to follow them. As I am not yet able to say if they leave Paris to-morrow, or what their plans are, I must inform you of their further movements by wire.

Yours faithfully,
William Short.'"

Jack was about to interrupt him, but he added, "One minute more if you please, sir, I have a telegram from Paris, received about an hour since, which I had better read before we begin to discuss plans."

He took the thin pink paper up from another place on the table and read it out, "'Couple left this day, destination Botzen, following.' Now, gentlemen, this is all I have to tell you, may I suggest that the hour is come for us to spend a little time in concerting our plans."

Jack was evidently very impatient to hear what his suggestions might be, and he began at once by begging Nowell to lose no time, saying, "I don't see anything

for it but for us to start at once for Botzen, where we shall be on the spot, and hear at once if the man Short gathers any new details, what do you say?"

Nowell looked at him attentively and answered: "Of course if your principal object is to trace your wife, and expense is no object, you will arrive at a conclusion quicker by joining Short at once, but, if you think there is any doubt as to the lady being really your wife, it would perhaps be wiser to remain in London, and wait until the post brings us further details from Botzen. To tell you the truth, as there seems to have been so little attempt at eluding pursuit on the part of this couple, my faith in their being the right people is a bit shaken. You see there is absolutely no trace of the elder lady connected with their flight, with the exception of their having become possessed of some of the notes which belonged to her, and, if you leave England at this time, you are only in pursuit of one of the persons concerned in the plot, and the attempt to trace Mrs. De Mora will have to await your return. It remains for you to choose which clue you wish to follow first. I feel sure that Mrs. De Mora is in hiding in England."

"I wish to assure myself as quickly as possible," replied Jack firmly, "if the lady your man is following is my wife, for two reasons, one is, that if it is really so, I wish to free myself at once of the bonds I have now round

me, which oblige me still to regard myself as her husband; and the other is, that if she is not the woman we take her to be, she should be freed herself, as soon as possible, from the espionage she does not deserve. If I find she is the woman I married, and she is travelling with a man for whose wife she allows herself to pass, as she seems to have done in Paris, I shall at once instruct my solicitor to commence the divorce-suit, full instructions for which I have given him, and which he will act upon on receipt of a telegram from me."

"Then, Mr. Darnley," replied Nowell, "I see no better plan for you than to leave London as quickly as you can, to confirm or dispel all doubt on the subject, but should you find that the lady is not the one you seek, you must not blame me, as you know that my advice to you would rather be to await further proofs before you leave England."

"You need have no fear," said Jack impatiently and with a bitter smile added, "I shall only be too glad if I find I am spared the disgrace of having married such a woman. I should be relieved to come back to you, to tell you to recommence your search in a quarter where there was less fear of such a guilty reason for her flight."

"Very well, Sir," said the detective agent, "will you kindly inform me when you intend to start, and give me an address where I can communicate with you by letter or telegram?"

"Certainly," said Jack, "I shall leave England by the early mail train to-morrow morning, and proceed at once from Paris to Botzen, travelling as fast as I can. You can telegraph to me at an hotel in Botzen, by the way have you a continental Bradshaw?"

The agent handed him the book and he looked in it, saying after he had found what he wanted, "Here are the names of the hotels, 'Sonnenhof' and 'Kaiser Krone,' as I know nothing of them, one will do as well as the other, let us settle then to go to the 'Sonnenhof' and there you can write or telegraph to me. Let me know, as soon as you hear from Short, where he is to be found, so that I can communicate at once with him."

"But in case his journey should not end there, Mr. Darnley," remarked Nowell, "how then? You will have lost time."

"Anything is preferable to inaction," replied Jack, "and I can but follow."

"That is true of course, but by waiting a little you might be able to choose a shorter route, and yet arrive as quickly at the end of your journey," Nowell answered, trying to offer every inducement he could to prevent Jack from rushing headlong, into what might be a fruitless enterprise.

"I shall go however," was the only answer Jack vouchsafed to the voice of reason embodied in Nowell. "No doubt," he continued, "you will like to have some money

to go on with in my absence. If you will give me a pen I will write you a cheque."

Nowell thanked him and offering a pen to Jack, the latter sat down and took his cheque book from his pocket. He wrote the cheque, merely waiting as he asked the question, "Will two hundred and fifty do? I should think I should be back before you want more, but these things cost a lot I know."

"That is amply sufficient, sir," answered Nowell without the faintest show of astonishment, although to my uninitiated ideas the sum seemed a very large one, however, as it was not my business, I held my tongue. There was very little more business to be transacted with the agent, and we found ourselves out in the street very shortly after this had passed, and, the door once closed upon us, I hoped never to see the inside of a place connected with so much unpleasant business again, and I am sure Jack would have echoed the wish had I given utterance to it. There was a strange light in his eyes as he walked silently up the short bit of street that intervened between Lancaster Chambers and the main thoroughfare of the Strand, and the look of intense determination on his face showed me that, though to all appearance he had taken the intelligence he had received so calmly, ill was boding for the person who had wounded him in his dearest notions of honour. In my heart I almost pitied the woman when he met her

face to face, to call her to account, so stern and cold was the expression of his mouth and eyes.

His voice had almost the sad hard tone of the first hours of his grief in it as he turned to me and said, "Val, it is awful to think that such creatures can be permitted to be so fair to the eye and such a mass of corruption within. Did the full horror of the situation strike you, when that man spoke of those two passing as man and wife, if she is really the woman who dared to go up to the altar with me? Such things as these are forbidden by the law of man as well as God, and one only wonders that she was not struck dead where she stood, by the vengeance of heaven. I should hardly look upon myself as a murderer if I took her life, she has robbed me of what is more valuable still."

"For heaven's sake, Jack, don't go to meet these people with such thoughts as these in your head? Remember that murder is equally forbidden by the statute that this woman has broken, and that is what it would be called if you took the law into your own hands."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But after a pause he continued gravely, "and yet if I did kill her, and him, I should but have swept two worthless beings off the face of the earth and not brought back my own honour and peace of mind. But I warn you, that if I find that this vile thing has been done, it will be hard for me

to keep my hands off the throat of the villain, when I stand face to face with him, as I must one day do."

"Jack," said I insensibly catching some of his concentrated tone of sorrow and anger, "a wrong such as yours will meet with a punishment more awful than any that you could devise, leave it in other hands, and if either of these two have a conscience, they will have some of the peace and beauty of life lost to them for ever in the knowledge of their past and future."

"What have such a couple to do with the finer instincts of life, Val? No, they will not be the ones to suffer, but if I can keep my hands off them, I promise I will for your sake, and also it would soil mine to be laid on them."

We both grew silent after this and not another word passed between us as we returned to St. James's Place. We were to start the next morning by the 8.40 mail train for Paris, and from thence it was settled we should go, with as little delay as possible, and by the shortest route to Botzen. As may be imagined we had a great deal to occupy our minds, besides the duties of packing and arranging for such a hurried start, so our evening was not spent in conversation, but preparation. We should also, as we knew, have ample time to talk during the long journey before us. I wrote home to my father, as well as to Mary, telling them that we were leaving the following morning; and giving the address of the hotel in Botzen which was

to be our stopping place, as Jack wished to travel night and day so as not to lose one moment. This done we both were glad to dine early and take as much sleep as we could, knowing, that if trains fitted, we should in all probability not rest between cool clean sheets for some nights, but take what ease we could in the cramped positions obligatory in the train.

CHAPTER XIV.

PROOF POSITIVE.

The morning came, and we went through the, to me, horrible process of getting up at an unearthly hour, dressing, and what is worse, shaving by gaslight. The day was cold but clear, and as we drew near Dover the sun broke out brightly, and January astonished us with a veritable spring day, such as it sometimes can do in our variable climate. The feverish impatience distinctly visible in Jack was not astonishing, and I felt myself imbued with some of it from sheer sympathy. To put oneself in another's place is one of the hardest of tasks to accomplish, and I cannot lay the flattering unction to my soul that I succeeded, but for all that, all my sympathy was with Jack, and if I did not entirely enter into and share all his feelings, at least I felt neither wonder nor annoyance at his inability to remain longer than he needed in a state of inactivity. It was very easy for an entirely dispassionate observer, like Nowell, to counsel patience, but had I been in Jack's place I should have done as he did, and gone to see for

myself. Therefore, although the journey took me far from where my heart was, I resigned myself to it, understanding that it would have been more than human for my travelling companion to have waited quietly for the result of an investigation, which he could, by a few hours of journeying, make in person. The time dragged sadly and it was with disgust that we found ourselves obliged to spend the night in Paris, but the only train we could find to take us on our way to Botzen was a slow one, and we could, at the outside, but have saved a couple of hours, whereas the express, leaving the following morning, gave us a comfortable night in a good hotel. It was a veritable purgatory to poor Jack, but he saw at last that it would be no substantial gain and he gave way, electing to go to the Hotel du Louvre, where he hoped to elicit some information with regard to the people we were in pursuit of. I had grave doubts as to the wisdom of this proceeding on his part, but he seemed so anxious and said with a kind of half hopefulness, "You see, Val, we might find out it was all nonsense that they passed as man and wife," that my heart melted for the poor fellow, in his anxiety to prove his wife's innocence, and I reluctantly consented. The result of his investigations justified me in my doubts of the wisdom of his choice of an hotel, as will be seen. We demanded rooms, if any were available, on the first floor, and were ushered into a small suite which were the only ones vacant

on the floor we required, it being Jack's intention to interrogate the waiter and chambermaid, as he was aware that the suspected couple had occupied rooms on the floor we selected.

The rooms we were ushered into, consisted of a small salon, into which opened from opposite sides, two bedrooms, they suited us very well, so, ordering a small dinner to be served in the salon, we installed ourselves to await the next morning with what patience we might. As soon as the dinner was over, and the waiter brought the coffee, Jack took the opportunity of telling him to bring the book in which the names of the guests for the last few days could be seen. The man left the room returning in a few moments with the book in his hand. Jack turned the leaves impatiently, and I saw him stop suddenly as he turned to look at the man who stood by him.

"Do you remember this lady and gentleman?" said he. "Señor Saragas and this lady, they only left a day or two ago?"

The man replied that he knew they had been on this floor, but, that as he was not on service he could not quite recollect, he however, was of opinion that if Josephine was asked she would know, as she had been on this floor for some time and had a capital memory. Jack gave the book back to the man and he went to call the woman. She came, and with the usual calmness of persons accustomed

to the comings and goings of different people of all nations, she seemed to treat the whole enquiry as quite natural. She informed Jack that she recollected the gentleman and lady perfectly. Monsieur was dark and slight, 'élancé' as she called it, pale and with a clean shaven face, and Madame was very beautiful. They had been on this floor, and now she thought of it, they had occupied the very room in which she now stood. Jack became very interested at once, as was only natural, and made many enquiries as to the personal appearance of the couple, and at last asked if there was any resemblance between the two, as he evidently had a notion that he might prove my theory about a brother to be the true one. The housemaid however, would not allow him to cherish the idea for one moment, and smiled at the suggestion. Monsieur and Madame, she said, were evidently the very opposites of each other, and she should say that they were husband and wife, as they had occupied the room next the salon, the one to the right, she added, indicating the larger one of the two opening into the salon, which it had been decided that I was to sleep in. Jack then enquired who had been in the other, and elicited the reply that it had been an English gentleman who had left the same day.

I saw that he was utterly wretched at this confirmation of his worst fears, but he had still enough command left over his feelings to dismiss the woman, with courteous thanks

for her kind information, and a five franc piece. I, who had feared some such revelation, reproached myself doubly for not having prevented him from coming to this ill fated hotel, all this might have been foreseen, and provided against, had I been firm.

The moment the door closed behind her poor Jack broke out, "Why was I such a fool as to have even a shadow of faith in her again, Val? This seems almost like the first shock of discovery over again, for I had allowed myself to hope that there might be something in what you suggested, and the man was only a brother after all. It is too hard too hard, what have I done to deserve such misery as this." And he strode up and down the room and I saw tears gather in his eyes.

How I cursed my folly in letting him expose himself again to such a cruel blow as this discovery must be. To hear it all told in such a 'banal' tone as that used by the chambermaid was worse than all, had he only known the full extent of the wrong done him when he was brought face to face with the guilty couple, it would have been less cruel, for then the possibility of his revenge, as it were within his reach, would have helped him to forget his grief partly, by reason of his anger. As it was the full weight of the grief was on him, and he had nothing to distract his thoughts but the possibility of a distant revenge, and patience was a positive suffering to him, as I could

well understand. I could give him no hope nor comfort in his distress of mind, and the only thing now was to do my utmost to assist him to free himself from his unequal bond, and trust to time to enable him to forget this wretched episode of his life.

I knew that sleep was impossible for Jack that night, as he was in no mood for rest, poor fellow, he strode up and down the room and at intervals, threw himself down in a chair, only to resume his walk after a few minutes. One of the worst signs to me was, that, now for the first time, he seemed unable to speak, even to me, of the subject which must of necessity have been the one nearest to his heart. There is always a relief in words to all human beings, and it is a mistake to think that it is only to the female sex that such an indulgence is common. The silence on the room was intensely painful to me, but I did not dare to break it, for there is an innate respect felt in every living being, irrespective of birth and education, for a real grief. If the spirit moved him I knew Jack would seek my confidence, and if he did not I would not force his. I sat in my chair, reviewing the situation in silence until the night was far spent, hardly liking to leave Jack alone, for his silent misery might have been too strong for control, had he found himself alone with no one to watch his actions, and I dreaded the result of a solitary night for him. Dawn I knew would bring the necessity for

renewed action, and, as the train started early, we must leave the hotel for the station at an hour not far distant, so I resigned myself to the search of as much comfort as can be found in a armchair. At length Jack spoke and much to my relief his voice was steady and his manner calm.

"You must promise me, Val, to carry out all the instructions I have left with Fenton if anything happens to me. You can understand that when we meet one or other of us will have to send in his account."

I knew that, although no name was mentioned, he meant to take the life of the man who wronged him or lose his own in the effort. It was no time to try and soften his heart to forgiveness at this time, so I gave the required promise, inwardly determining to watch every action, and prevent him from taking a summary vengeance, so far as lay in my power. The horrible night of anxiety for us both was over at last, and in the due course dawn broke, finding us still in our clothes and awake, and when the knock came at the door to warn us that it was drawing near the time for departure to the station, neither Jack nor I had had the sleep that would have been such a relief to both of us. He heard it first, and, rising from the chair where he had at last sunk from sheer fatigue of limb, went to the door, and requesting that some hot water might be brought, went to his room and proceeded to make some kind of toilette before starting. The journey was very

like all such things are, and even the anxiety of our impatient thoughts could not hurry away one minute quicker than the time required for the hands to traverse the allotted space on the dial of a watch. It is a terrible thing to take a journey under the circumstances in which Jack and I found ourselves, for the time creeps by in the forced inactivity, and express trains cannot soothe the impatience or equal the velocity of thought, of a man in the strained state of mind and nerve of my travelling companion. It seemed as if we could never arrive at our destination and the hours were leaden in their flight. The days and nights of travel, which passed with only here and there a slight break when we had to change carriage or line, fell behind us by slow degrees and at last we found ourselves at Botzen where, at this time of the year the traffic was not great, and we went straight to the Hotel Sonnenhof to take our rooms there. Jack looked years older than he had done when I came up to London a few days before, and he was so physically exhausted that I knew he must sleep from sheer fatigue of body. I persuaded him to seek rest at once on the plea that, if he neglected to do so, his strength would fail, and the further pursuit of his object would become impossible to him, from the failure of physical strength. We found the rooms comfortable and well warmed, for the weather was bitterly cold, and we both sought rest.

There was a telegram awaiting Jack's arrival, informing

us that the detective Short had followed the lady and gentleman up to the country above Botzen, but, that as soon as he had discovered if he was on the right track, he would return to Botzen to give all the information he could to us at the Sonnenhof. It was the receipt of this telegram, and the certainty it produced that further action was impossible until the return of Short, that added weight to my entreaties to Jack to rest, and induced him to comply.

The morning found me much refreshed and even Jack looked a new man, for the weary look of ceaseless travel was gone and his face, though pale and worn, had lost the look of bodily fatigue that had made me almost fear that his strength was failing him. We were both quite in ignorance if Nowell had been able to tell the detective Short of our whereabouts in Botzen, but as we were unable to communicate with him until his return to the town itself, there was nothing for it but to telegraph the news of our arrival to Nowell, and wait in patience for the appearance of Short.

In the meantime we found out all about conveyances, and means of transit, at the time of year it then was, with the result of knowing that all journeys which led away from the railway, and a few highroads, must be performed on mules, and were not wholly unaccompanied with risk to the travellers by reason of the snow. This we heard lay thick and heavy and, some of the mountain passes

were dangerous in consequence, as, not only were the drifts deep, but the paths themselves were difficult to follow in places. We gathered from this, that if our chase led us far afield, we should have to provide ourselves with a guide and trust to the slow progress of mules, horses and carriages being out of the question, even in the summer, except on the broad roads. The time hung heavily on our hands, but on the day after our arrival the joyful news was brought us that an Englishman had come to enquire for us, and the writer handed a card to Jack as he spoke, upon which was engraved "William Short." Telling the man to show him in at once, Jack turned to me and hardly able to control his impatience said:

"At last, Val, we shall know the end of this miserable story."

I sympathised fully with him and was hardly less anxious to see the man than he was. The door opened and a tall thin young man was ushered in. He wore a thick suit of dark tweed and a fur lined coat which he asked permission to lay aside as he entered. His appearance was that of a rather flashy commercial traveller and his air and look rather familiar than not, but his face was shrewd, and in our present state of anxious expectation, Jack and I were not likely to be very severe critics of manners. Jack spoke first, asking him impatiently to speak out.

"Tell me where you come from, Mr. Short, as soon as you can, I beg. I presume," he added more quietly, "that

Mr. Nowell has told you all the details of the case you are watching."

The young man answered with an unconcerned air and as if quite at home: "Certainly, Sir, I also presume I am speaking to Mr. Darnley. I know all the main facts of the case I am conducting, but, if you could make it convenient, I should like to feed before I enter upon a long story. You must remember, gentlemen, that it is late in the afternoon, and I have travelled for some hours, and am starving, not having stopped for food on my way. Now I have found out that you are the gentleman to whom I am to tell my business, I should be glad if you would allow me to get some refreshment, and appoint an hour when I should feel more in trim for my work."

He looked from one of us to the other, and with a smothered exclamation of impatience Jack rang the bell, and turning to Short said, "I will order a room for you here, tell the waiter to get you all you want, and when you are ready come here to us, and let me beg you to remember, I am as anxious for news as you for food."

So saying he gave the orders to the waiter who stood at the door, and after watching the man leave the room, he turned to me and remarked, "After all it is but natural, Val, that an empty stomach should be more important to a fellow like that, than all the anxiety in the world, so long as it does not affect him personally. We are selfish brutes

all of us. I wanted that fellow to ease my mind before he comforted his own body, so there is but little to choose between us."

I knew that the post had gone for that day, and so it could make but little difference if the man told his story after dinner or before, as far as anything of that kind went, and Jack's patience, already sorely tried, must go through yet another ordeal. I suggested that we should occupy our time by dining at the same time, and that then we should be at liberty to talk to Short, and hear all he had to say at leisure, this plan found favour in Jack's eyes and we ate our dinner, he with a better appetite than he had shown for some days. We went up again and installed ourselves in armchairs to await the arrival of Short, and hardly had we begun our cigars before the waiter came to announce that he was ready to wait on us if we would receive him. He entered the room with the air of a man thoroughly at peace with himself, and took the chair indicated by Jack with a vast amount of self-possession.

Jack opened the conversation by remarking, "We know what happened up to the time you reached Paris, Mr. Short, will you be so kind as to tell us what steps you took upon arriving at the Hotel du Louvre?"

"Well, sir," said the young man jauntily, "thanks to my appearance not being open to a suspicion of my belonging to any profession but one entitling me to occupy

the best rooms in an hotel, I was able to secure one on the first floor at the same hotel where the lady and gentleman were. This room happened to be only divided from the one occupied by them by a small salon. Nothing could have suited me better as they could not escape without my eye being upon them. It was in this small salon that they dined that night and, owing to my room being next to it, I was able to hear a good deal of their conversation during their dinner. I became possessed of the knowledge that they were to leave by an afternoon train the next day. The gentleman was to go the following morning to the banker's house, upon whom he held the letters of credit, and draw out the whole of the sum in French notes and gold. I was determined to watch for him and look well at his face and figure so as to be able to recognise him with no difficulty at any future time. I went early to bed and was up early the next morning, so that I could be sure to see the gentleman start to the banker's house. He left the hotel at about 9.30 the following morning and I managed to stroll out of my room just as he started. He had a hat on which shaded his face somewhat, so I cast about in my brain for some means to make him remove it. At last it occurred to me that if I could contrive to jostle him, and then begging his pardon, removing my own hat as I did so, he would be obliged, by his foreign customs, to return my salute by raising his hat.

It was easily done and he raised his hat, giving me as full a view of the pale smooth shaven face as I could wish. He hardly looked at me beyond the slight glance necessary to return my bow, giving, as he did so, a slight smile which, to my mind did not improve his appearance, and a more evil looking countenance I have seldom set eyes on, even in my profession. I can swear to him anywhere now, with or without his hat, and that was what I wanted. I did not think it wise to follow him again now that I had made sure of recognising him, and as he had left the lady at the hotel I knew he would return, so I left him to his own devices and went off to get my ticket, and all details for the journey, to this place. I got every thing ready to start when they did, and as soon as they left the hotel I took a cab following close behind them and got into the same train and arrived here with them. All my difficulty has been since I arrived here, for owing to the snow and the bad state of the roads, no traffic can be carried on between here and the mountain villages, except on mules. They left the morning after their arrival for a place in the mountains, about 40 miles from here, and I knew it was impossible for me to follow them without being suspected. I therefore contented myself with finding out the villages they had to pass through, this I did by asking the owner of the mules that they hired, who, having no reason for concealment, gave me the fullest

information. I went about the town until I found another mule owner, and hiring two decent animals and a guide, I went up to a small village, which I had discovered to be the last passed through by the couple I was tracking, on their journey to the mountains. It was at this village I spent last night, and from which I had just returned when I first had the pleasure of seeing you two gentlemen."

He paused, and Jack interrupted him eagerly, enquiring, "Did you find out where they were bound for, and why did you not follow them further?"

Short drew himself up with an offended air as he answered: "I have not been accustomed to such things all these years, sir, for nothing, and I should not have returned had I not been sure that my enquiries were successful."

I smiled when this young looking man, barely older than Jack himself, spoke of years of experience, but I forbore to remark upon the apparent discrepancy between his looks and his knowledge, so I suggested to Jack that perhaps Short might like some wine and a cigar before he continued his story.

CHAPTER XV.

A GHOSTLY RIDE. BLACK CARE SITS BEHIND THE HORSEMAN.

Jack rang the bell impatient at my interruption and took no notice of the detective's evident pleasure at the prospect of his creature comforts being attended to. I therefore drew a cigar from my case and pouring out some brandy and water offered both to Short, who took them willingly, before he recommenced. Jack tapped his foot on the ground impatiently, and the liquid was barely down the detective's throat before he said:

"Well, what was the result of your journey to this village?"

"It is very bad riding, sir, and in some places enough to make one think twice before starting, did one know of it before hand."

Jack shrugged his shoulders as if to say he did not care for such details as these, but he wisely forbore to interrupt the flow of eloquence and waited, expectant, but silent.

"I arrived at last at the village I wanted to stay at, after twelve hours on as rough a mule as one could find in the whole town, I believe. The people of the only inn there, if one can call it by such a name, are civil and obliging, but they speak an unearthly lingo which, if I had not had my guide to interpret for me, I should have been none the wiser for. They were intensely surprised at the unheard of occurrence of a stranger's appearance in their village at such a time, when the snow was still so thick as to render the mule-tracks hard to find, and unfit for traffic for those unused to them. I made out by the kind offices of my guide that they had had a visit the day previously from the couple I was in search of, but this did not appear to have been so great a surprise as my advent was causing them. It appears that some three years since, a gentleman and lady had come, during the summer to Botzen, and had bought a property up in the hills some few miles beyond this village. In this they had lived for a couple of years, shooting and fishing in the summer, and during the winter, having large stores sent up three times in the week by mules from Botzen, these stores being not only food and such necessities, but books and other amusements for the winter months. They were foreigners of course, no one but foreigners could do such mad things, thought the honest innkeeper, but, for all that, they did good in the neigh-

bourhood and gave employment to the people during the winter, which was always a hard time to keep body and soul together in, in the mountains. They had gone away about a year before, he informed me, and had not been heard of or left any address, the house was in charge of a peasant woman and her husband, who was forester on the grounds of the house. They had come back the day before, quite suddenly, but this did not seem to be odd to the man. I asked him if he did not think the proceeding a strange one that they should arrive at such a time. Apparently he did not, for he said they were so well known there, and that they only came back to their own belongings, why not now as well as later. I had a desperate qualm at one moment that my couple must have slipped away in some other direction, and that I was on the wrong track but no, when I asked for a description of them there was no mistaking it. They have been known by the name of Saragas, which they also gave in the hotel in Paris. They have played a very bold game, Sir, since they have been away from these parts, and you will excuse me, sir, for saying it," he added, "they must have met with a very unsuspicious reception to be able to win it."

Jack rose from his chair, his eyes blazing with anger as he said: "I will demand from this man why he inveigled away the woman I married, if I have to do it

with my hand on his throat. You can show us the way to this village, Short, I presume, and can also order mules for us, and get a guide for to-morrow."

"You can start as soon as you like to-morrow, Sir," he answered, "when we get to Val Travignolo, as the village is called, we can enquire the way up to the house where the Saragas live."

"Then this part of it I will leave to you to arrange," said Jack, "lose no time about it or they may escape us. I think that is all you can have to tell us to-night and you will want rest if we are to start to-morrow."

Short understood that this was his dismissal for the evening, and rising he thanked us both for the hospitality shown him and withdrew, wishing us a very good night's rest, having promised to make all arrangements for us to leave the next morning for Val Travignolo.

When the door closed upon him Jack seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as he said.

"At last, Val, I can be natural once more. In the presence of that man I felt it incumbent upon me to preserve a certain amount of outward indifference. Now he is gone I can indulge myself, and oh, Val, what a relief it is! For a man to have to sit and listen calmly to what I have had to hear to-night, is a veritable crucifixion. Put yourself in my place, dear old boy, and think what you would have felt, if some common fellow

like Short, had been detailing to you the shame of the woman you had loved and thought was your own, in much the same tone that he would have discussed the price of beef or mutton in the open market, whilst you had to sit by and listen to it all without a single outward show of anger. Can a man go through a worse humiliation than that? Not only does he suffer in his vanity, but the very deepest springs of a man's nature are poisoned by such a thing if he is a right minded being, and had looked upon his marriage ties as the most sacred of his life. Val, I had hoped to find all the joy of my life in years to come in the love of that woman; and what have I had to stand face to face with but the basest deception and debasement, coming from her whom I placed above all others upon the face of this earth."

I had hardly expected to find such depth of feeling in the high spirited, and hitherto thoughtless, man before me, and my pity was the greater because I felt that I had to face a hitherto untried element in his nature, and tried to soothe him in his pain, although I felt that he could not in his present frame of mind understand my reasoning, but, when calmness came with the flight of time, my words might come back and bring balm with them.

"You are young," I urged, "and as years go on you will live down this sorrow, for you are free from blame in the matter, and, if you have nothing to regret by taking

a vengeance that does not belong to you, your peace of mind will come back to you in after days."

"What can a vulgar vengeance do for me?" he said sadly. "I cannot wipe out the stain, and what should I do but make it deeper by murdering the man, if I meet him. Enough of this, I must be a sad trial to you with all my miseries, real and imaginary. Let us go to bed and leave things to run their course."

He got up, and lighting his candle prepared to go to bed, wishing me good night, and so we parted for that night. I with a heart aching for the poor fellow whom I was powerless to help with the best will in the world. We were to start for Val Travignolo the next morning, where the people we were tracing were apparently well known, and Jack would have no trouble in finding out how to reach their place of abode. This done he would of course go and demand of the woman he had married an explanation of her conduct, or if the opportunity offered, seek it from the lips of the man who had accompanied her in her flight. There could be no doubt, since the detective had told his story, that there was more than a justifiable cause for suspicion, indeed it seemed a certainty that Jack had been the victim of some disgraceful plot. These two had lived as man and wife, if Short's information was correct, in this out of the way corner of the world for some two years previous to the appearance

of Juanita in the fashionable world. The only thing that puzzled me was what role Mrs. De Mora had played in the drama, she was certainly not with them, and equally certainly, she was implicated in the plot, since she had assisted the escape of her daughter, a fact that was amply proved by her disappearance at a time when, if there was nothing wrong, and the act was one of pure folly, a few words from her could have set our minds at rest. But she had vanished, as completely as the morning dew beneath the rays of a midday sun in summer, proving that she could not face the consequences of having aided her daughter and this unknown man. However idle speculation was, I could not prevent my mind from following a train of conjecture, and, full of anxiety for what the next few days would bring to light, I went to bed. As soon as we could get ready the next day we left the Sonnenhof at Botzen, retaining our rooms in the hotel, and leaving most of our things there, to await our return, taking, as the journey was to be performed on mules, only what was necessary for our comfort during a stay of a night or two in the country inn at Val Travignolo, which was the basis of our operations.

We hoped to reach Val Travignolo that night, but we knew that we had 20 miles to ride to a place called Predazzo, and from thence there was a weary ride of another three hours to Val Travignolo. This we had been

informed of by Short, and he was of course not able to say how far further up in the forests of the Fassa Alps lay the place belonging to the Saragas, as they were apparently called. The village itself, where the detective had informed us he found the couple to be well known to the innkeeper and others of the community, was on the borders of the forest covering the Fassa Alps; and how much farther into the Dolomite country we might have to penetrate was uncertain. The journey was a lovely one and, had we been able to spare time to enjoy the scenery, we should have found something at every turn to repay us for our pains, but we had not leisure to devote to the artistic beauties of the exquisite scenery, all the grander and more weird for the huge pine trees in their shroud of snow, and the fantastic wreathing drifts overhanging the paths and precipices, and we pressed on hurriedly to our destination.

Our party consisted of Jack, myself and Short, mounted on sturdy mules, our guide was on another and led, or drove, another mule, upon whom was strapped the small amount of luggage which we had permitted ourselves to take. The daylight was precious, as it does not last long anywhere in January, but in the shade of these forests and frowning hills it is doubly so, and we soon found that we should not get beyond Predazzo the first day unless we prolonged our journey into the dusk. Our guide

informed us that in the present condition of the road it would be impossible for us to continue our journey, unless the moon should be very bright, which it sometimes could be, in the clear mountain air. We reached this town, or rather village, and the light had entirely failed, but as the moon was not an early one, we decided to rest for a while, and if the sky was clear and the moon proved friendly, to remount and finish the three remaining hours of journey to Val Travignolo by her light.

At about half past nine the sky was like a clear dark sapphire, the moon rose, and her rays reflected from the silver carpet of snow, illuminated the surrounding country with a brilliant luminous light, in which the branches of the dark firs seemed to sparkle, as if each individual spine of which they were composed had been sprinkled with diamond dust. There was no wind, and the air, eager as it was, felt like some curious intoxicant which entered the veins and left the brain clear. Jack in his impatience could not bear to waste a moment of time and I too, felt that such a night as this was better spent in the open air, mid winter though it was, than beneath the shelter of the far from luxurious roof of the little inn where we had stopped to bait our mules, and eat what food was forthcoming for ourselves. We therefore started again for our three hours' ride to Val Travignolo, the guide assured us that these paths leading to the Alps, and from thence to

the fastnesses of the solemn weird Dolomites, were as secure and deserted as the deserts of Africa, and that night and day were equally secure for travelling, so we had no hesitation in continuing our ride.

I shall never forget the solemn beauty of that windless moonlight night, as we wound our way silently up the narrow path, sometimes beneath the twisted arms of the ghostly pines, which seemed to be holding a shining white winding sheet of snow over our heads, and again we crept slowly by a black precipice, looking of a velvety softness by contrast of intense shadow against the pure dazzling carpet that stretched up to its very edge. Occasionally even the sure footed mules made a slip; and a more unearthly cavalcade than we must have looked, had any one happened to cross our path, I cannot imagine. As I rode noiselessly on, never daring to relax my watch for one instant, for fear that if my mule made a slip I might lose my balance and be dashed over into one of the gulfs, that more often than not yawned on one side or the other, I felt an icy chill creep into my heart quite apart from any feeling I have had, before or since. It was all so strangely quiet, for even the footfall of the mules was muffled in the snow, and at one moment the stillness seemed so painful that I was glad to hear the jingle of my bridle as I shook it, and the creak of my saddle, to persuade me that we were not a file of ghosts,

passing through a purgatory of snow. This silence was perhaps preferable to a sound which startled us all about half way on our journey.

We had drawn up on a kind of plateau and were giving a moment's rest to our mules, who had to breast a steep ascent of some duration, when a soft sound reached our ears gathering in intensity till it became a hollow roar, with an unearthly rattle as of thousands of stones broken by a faint crashing of riven boughs, as if some wind-gust were tearing them apart from their parent trunks. The mules raised their heads as if to listen, and the guide reassured us by saying it was only the sound of an avalanche on one of the distant slopes of the Fassa Alps; such things were common, he said, and the sound was, first of tons of frozen snow slipping, gathering the stones as it rushed onward, breaking through the small trees in its descent, till it reached some valley, where the slope being less, it was at last arrested in its course. There was no danger in the path we were in, and this avalanche, he said, may have been many miles away, for such sounds were clearly audible in this clear air, and were increased by the innumerable echoes of the mountainous district in which they occurred. It was an intense relief to me when we drew near the village of Val Travignolo, and the veriest pothouse would have been a welcome shelter to me just then, for my senses felt overstrained, and I dreaded too that Jack

might fall under the curious influence of the night, and that his sorrow might burden him more than he could bear in the solitude of this grand world of silence, where commune with his own heart was uninterrupted by trace of human presence, save that of the few connected with the object of his journey. It was very late as we went up the little narrow paved street, and with the exception of one or two primitive lanterns hanging outside some of the houses, there was no light to be seen, but the mere presence of humanity, wrapped in slumber though each individual might be, and the knowledge of their existence, was a consolation. It seemed to cheer one to come out of the awful presence of nature, alone in her majestic power, wherein one hardly dared to claim one's own identity, and in the face of whose vastnesses man was nothing, to such habitations as had been built by the hands of one's fellow mortals. Our guide, who knew the place well, knocked up the host of the little inn; and we found ourselves, in the course of a few minutes, under its friendly shelter. The room was bare but clean, and soon a cheerful wood fire burnt upon the wide stone hearth, and some smoky candles did their utmost to chase away the darkness which hung obstinately in the nooks of the beamed ceiling.

The fare was not luxurious as may be imagined, for such inns as these offer but small inducements to those who look upon good food as a necessity, even in the summer

season when a certain number of tourists visit them, but now, when no one who had not business ever entered them, there was next to nothing. Those who had business there were such as foresters, timber cutters and peasants, with here and there a gentleman who came on the chance of shooting a wolf or two, and their palates, not being hard to please so long as the staff of life was available, no preparations were made for providing more than just enough to ward off starvation. The whole party assembled and ate together in the room which was kitchen and sitting-room combined, and our two selves, Short and the guide, sat down in company, to eat what mine host put before us. The patois he spoke was, as Short said, very hard to understand, but, as we were acquainted with a little German, not quite so unintelligible to us as it had been to him, and with here and there the help of our guide, we could easily learn all we wanted to know. The place where the Saragas had lived, and to which they had now returned, was situated some twelve miles from Val Travignolo, and the path to it lay through the forest, and up some spurs of the mountain, towards the commencement of the Dolomites. The way was rough he told us, and in places very dangerous without a good guide at times when the snow was deep. It would take us two hours or more upon mules to arrive there. He informed us that the following day some woodmen, who had come down from beyond the house

we were bound for, would be returning and could for a small sum show us the path we must follow. He advised us to leave our own mules and hire others, and a man also, to carry anything we wished to take with us. By starting early we could arrive before midday and return without inconvenience the same evening. He undertook to arrange all this for us by the morning and we gladly betook ourselves to rest after our weary ride, and the varied emotions of our minds helped and aggravated the fatigue of body, making rest, to me personally, indispensable.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE BRINK.

The morning rose, clear and fresh, and the little village in the forest looked peaceful and lovely as we rode away, and it seemed almost impossible, that unless some unforseen accident occurred, it was upon this day that the last act of the drama, connected with Jack's unhappy marriage, was to be played out. That night, if we still all lived, we should ride back to the little village that now lay behind us, wiser and sadder men, and I devoutly prayed that there might be no stain of blood upon our hands. The road, if one can call it by such a name, for it was little more than a track, was very like that we had passed between Predazzo and our halting place, but in the sunlight the most weird effects were gone, and had we not been bound upon an errand that robbed us of all enjoyment, nothing could have been more exhilarating than the air and scenery. The woodcutters, who went ahead, talked merrily and every now and then a note or two of some tune broke out, and the numberless echoes in the hills and forests caught it up and they rang

joyfully round us, as we rode along. The merriment jarred upon me, and every nerve in my body seemed strung up to breaking pitch. I think I was more aware of this feeling than Jack himself was, for though he was the chief actor and up to that moment had felt it all more acutely than I, yet when the crucial moment was near he had all the outward appearance of a greater command over his nerves than I could pretend to. Perhaps the knowledge that he was so near the climax, for the attainment of which he had spared no physical exertion, helped to enable him by a supreme effort to remain calm, and I, who knew that my part of the affair must of necessity be that of an onlooker, felt the impatience of inaction upon me, and this was the cause of our apparently having changed places; but so it was, and if any one's hand trembled and breath came quickly it was mine, not his. I was painfully aware of my unwonted tension of mind as I followed him slowly up the mountain path, and the blood burnt hotly in my face in spite of the cool morning air of the mountains. We went slowly on, until a division in the path caused the woodcutters to stop, and they told us that here our ways diverged, they passed on to the left, telling us to continue the ill defined path that led to the right, and which would lead us ultimately to the gates of the Saragas's house. Our guide informed us it was about three miles from the spot on which we stood, and that he knew the way perfectly; there was, he said,

about a mile from the gates a small colony of huts belonging to some woodcutters, and here he advised us to dismount and leave our mules, doing the last mile of our journey on foot. We should not lose time by this means, as the last part was as quickly done by walking as riding. We arrived at the woodcutters' cottages, and dismounting prepared to pursue the path on foot. Jack took from his pocket a case of pistols and examined them attentively without a word, replacing them in his coat. I dreaded, that if we should meet the man he sought by any chance, his calmness would forsake him and something would happen that no earthly power could revoke. I therefore went to him and begged him to confide the weapons to my keeping, to my great relief he did so without a murmur, and I took the case, putting it safely away where, should it be required, I could lay my hand upon it at a moment's notice. These slight preparations completed, we started for our walk, Jack ahead, the guide next to him and Short and myself following, and in this order we filed slowly up the snow covered path. My thoughts were solemn enough as I went through this silent snow clad region, the intense purity of all our surroundings would have impressed a less susceptible nature than mine. We were drawing closer and closer to the place where at last Jack would call the guilty couple to their account, and a strange feeling of excitement crept over me as I went step by step up that never to be

forgotten path. We could not be very far from the house, for as I drew my watch out I saw that we had already been walking for half an hour. The guide halted for a moment and, indicating a short ascent which lay just before us, said that the house would be visible as we turned the corner beyond. My heart beat strongly and I wondered what course Jack meant to pursue. Did he mean to go to the door as a visitor, and demand his explanation without more preliminary than to be shown into their presence?

I might have spared myself the anxiety of those last few minutes had I known, for chance brought about the meeting in a way that spared all necessity for arranging preliminaries of any kind. Jack, as I said, went first, and he strode up the path a few yards in front, quite in ignorance that he would see the house so soon, for the guide had turned to me with the information. The path was less precipitous and the slope from it was not sheer, but steep and stony, with a few stunted trees growing at intervals between the rocks and loose stones and showing above the snow. Just as my companion turned the corner I quickened my pace, and passing the guide came almost alongside of Jack, fearing the effect of the first view of the house. As I did so my eye caught sight of a couple of figures coming towards us, and it took but one glance for me to assure myself that one of these was Juanita De Mora, and with her was the man we were in search of.

Jack at the moment had his eyes bent upon the path at his feet, which was here very narrow, and I saw that in one minute they would be upon us, so, with a beating heart, I laid my hand upon Jack's shoulder and pointed silently to the two who were now but a few yards distant. Their steps had been muffled by the snow, and were unperceived as ours had been by them, and they were in earnest converse, Juanita, with her beautiful face radiant with joy, was looking fondly into the eyes of the man at her side. Before I could restrain him, and with a hoarse low cry, Jack sprang on them and for one short second the two men faced each other. To my horror I saw the flash of a knife in Saragas's hand. A short struggle followed, but with such lightning rapidity had it all happened that I was powerless to interfere, and in one instant I saw Jack sink back against the rock, with the red blood streaming from his shoulder, and the man who had stabbed him, tripping, fell with a hollow crash over the sloping side of the precipitous path. Juanita's face, bloodless with terror and her great blue eyes strained, smote me to the heart as she leant over the edge, calling in despair for someone to help her to recover the helpless body of the man which lay beneath, caught against the trunk of a tree some feet below. I turned to support Jack, who from loss of blood, pain and anger had fainted, and calling to Short and the guide to help to recover the body of the man, I endeavoured

to lay my poor friend in some place of safety, where I proceeded to pour some brandy down his throat. He opened his eyes in a few moments, his wound was not very severe as I could see, for the knife which had been employed with such murderous intent had passed through the large muscles of the arm below the shoulder, and beyond the loss of blood and the shock to his nerves, there was not much to fear. He begged me faintly to go and ascertain if the man was dead, and then relapsing into a state of unconsciousness sank back. I covered him carefully, to prevent the chill of the snow reaching him, with my own coat and overcoat, and leaving the place where he lay went back to the spot some few yards distant, where Short and the guide had remained to assist in the recovery of the wretched man. As I came near I saw that they had managed to draw him up on to the path, a not very difficult task, for, as has been explained, the decline was not so steep as to be impossible to scale at that place, and that he now lay upon the level ground. Juanita, with a look of abject terror such as I have never seen upon any woman's face before or since, bent over him. As I leant over to catch sight of his face I saw that his eyes were open, and he was apparently conscious although perfectly unable to move, and his lower limbs were powerless. I shall never forget the look of concentrated rage and agony that shone in his face as he perceived me, and a smile of malicious, but

impotent triumph curled his lips. I drew back in horror, for at that moment I believed myself in possession of the secret we were in search of the key to. Before me lay, unless my eyes deceived me, the face of Mrs. De Mora! She then had disguised herself as a man and left London with her daughter, but the reason for the flight and the disguise were as yet unfathomed. I could see easily that the poor inert mass lying at my feet would never again move, for it took no surgical knowledge to see that the spine was broken and that, though all the mental faculties remained unimpaired, it was but a question of time for death to claim his own. Telling the guide to hurry to the house and tell them to send assistance to carry the wounded people, mules if possible, to take Jack back at least as far as the woodcutters' huts and a litter to convey the wretched half dead owner of the house back, where nursing and attention might lessen the horrors of a death that must creep slowly over a still conscious being, with faculties undimmed by illness. How was I to go back to Jack and tell him that the man who had wounded him in the struggle, and who now lay without hope of recovery with a broken back, was none other, as far as I could tell, than the mother of the woman he had married, and who for some unexplained reason had disguised herself to assist in Juanita's flight. This was an idea that had never occurred to either of us or to the detective, and a great bound of joy came

to my heart as I thought that perhaps after all Jack's happiness was not so hopelessly ruined. Should I tell him or should I wait, until he was a little recovered from the wound he had received, and was better able to bear the news? I decided upon the latter course and also it would enable me to go the next day to the house and ask an explanation, from Juanita, of the cause of this disguise. She could not refuse to tell me the truth if I came on behalf of her husband, my best friend.

We had not to wait very long before the guide returned with a mule, upon which Jack was able to be put, and we retraced our steps for a little until we reached the woodcutters' huts where we found hospitality for him. I sent the detective Short back, with instructions to use all haste he could, to Val Travignolo; from whence he could go to Botzen and telegraph to my aunt and sister, whom I begged to come out to help to nurse Jack, bringing a doctor with them.

Jack was not in any great danger from his wound as I knew, but the shock to his overstrained nerves had been very great, and by the evening he was in a raging fever. I found one of the wives of the woodcutters to assist me to nurse him and I applied such palliatives to his pain as I had at hand. I knew that some days must elapse before any assistance could come to me and that I must face the situation as best I might. His constitution

was strong and his health unimpaired, so I had great hopes, that at any rate for the few days during which my small skill would be the only resource, he would not succumb.

My great anxiety was, to go to the Saragas's house before time enough had elapsed to allow of a fatal termination to the episode, so as to be able to relieve Jack's mind of anxiety, which I fiirmly believed would be half way towards curing him. I therefore made all arrangements with the wife of the woodcutter to watch by his bedside the following day, and made up my mind to walk to the Saragas's house to learn all the details of the story. I had no compunctions in leaving my patient, as he lay in a condition when it was only necessary to watch him carefully, and keep up his strength by administering milk and strong broth, the latter commodity, owing to the dearth of provision in the neighbourhood, having to be made from dried meat and chickens, but, as the woman was as well able to undertake this duty as I, the first thought I had was to see Juanita. Some twenty four hours after the scene of the accident I left the huts, and wended my way to the house where I intended to see Juanita De Mora, and tax her without hesitation with having been the cause of the catastrophe. I rang the bell at the gate quietly and entered the small court-yard with some hesitation, for Jack being too ill to sanction my enquiry, I had come on

my own responsibility. A woman came to answer my summons, and told me that the master of the house lay in much the same state since the time of his having been carried in after the accident. She spoke as if there was no doubt of the sick person being the husband of Juanita, and I am bound to confess I was completely puzzled. I could not think I had been mistaken in the features which I had so distinctly recognised as those of Mrs. De Mora. I begged her to request the lady of the house to grant me an interview, and pencilled my name upon a scrap of paper furnished me by the woman, for visiting cards were not among the luxuries provided for our journey from Val Travignolo. I waited for some time turning over in my mind the best way to become possessed of the knowledge I wanted.

The woman reappeared with an answer from Juanita to the effect that she neither could, nor would, see me, and furthermore, she requested that I would desist from any attempt to see her under the circumstances. In the face of this it was clearly impossible for me to force myself into her presence, and so, feeling rather discomfited, I retraced my way to the hut, and took up my place by Jack's bedside to await the arrival of my aunt and sister. The time passed slowly enough and the few days that elapsed before their arrival seemed like years. When they came, bringing with them a young doctor, who had been recommended as clever by

one of the members of the medical profession in London, I felt an intense relief of mind. The doctor, upon examining the condition of his patient, gave it as his opinion that he was suffering only from intense weakness consequent upon loss of blood supervening upon nervous exhaustion, and that as this was fully accounted for by the events of the past weeks, he hoped that careful nursing and rest would restore him to health in a short time. I had all this time felt very far from satisfied at the ill result of my enquiries in the direction of the De Moras. I now cast about to find some means by which to get some information about them, and to this end consulted my aunt and sister. With the ready wit of a woman my sister hit upon a plan which seemed to offer many advantages. This was, that the doctor who had come out with them to attend to Jack, should be sent over to the house to enquire if he could offer any medical assistance to the sick man. My aunt and sister persisted in the idea that the invalid could not be Mrs. De Mora in disguise; and that my eyes must have deceived me. It was certainly a sure means of discovery to send the doctor and, if his services were accepted, we should soon know what to believe. Accordingly I sat down and penned a short note to Juanita, and entrusting it to the hands of one of the woodmen, I asked the doctor to go with him in the hope that something might result from the attempt. I saw them

start with mingled feelings upon their errand, it was pretty certain, that if there was danger Juanita would be only too glad to accept the services of a doctor, and yet, should the wounded person have succumbed to the injuries sustained in the fall, the visit might prove fruitless. The distance was so short that I knew I should have but little time to wait before some news reached us, but waiting in patience is a difficult matter when one is as anxious as I was, and I hardly knew how to pass the time. The weather which had been brilliant, if cold, had now changed and a heavy spring rain having fallen, all exercise had to be taken at the sacrifice of a good wetting, so I went into the house and occupied myself in writing to Mary. My aunt and sister had brought me very good accounts of her; and she and her father were remaining at Brantingford, to keep my father company, during the absence of the female portion of the family. Engrossed at last in my letter I did not notice the progress of time, and it was a surprise to me when I heard a knock at the door and, upon the visitor entering, I saw Dr. Morgan. He sat down and told me that upon presenting my note he had been asked to visit the sick-bed.

"I found the man whom I went to see suffering from a fractured spine, Mr. Trentham," he said gravely, "and although he is in possession of all his faculties, owing to the fracture being in such a point as to affect the lower limbs only, it is but a question of days

with him. These accidents are amongst the most painful to watch over as the patient, as well as those who are in attendance, are aware that there is but one result, death. The despair of the unfortunate woman who never leaves his side, is perfectly heart-rending, and whatever her sins are she is expiating them in these days of hopeless misery."

"Are you certain, doctor," I enquired, "that the patient is the husband of the lady?"

"I have made no enquiries," he replied, "but to judge by her devotion to him and her heart-broken state when I informed her, as I felt bound to do, that his injuries must prove fatal, I think there can be no doubt of it."

I had not imparted my suspicions to the doctor that the wounded person was a woman in disguise, but, as he spoke confidently of the sufferer as a man, I felt more than ever at sea, and even distrusted my own eyes. He must have known of what he was speaking, and I could not have seen aright in the excitement of the accident, Dr. Morgan seemed very confident, and I became more and more puzzled, as he continued,

"I am the bearer of a message to you from the sick man, Mr. Trentham. He begged me to request that Mr. Darnley would come to him, as he desired to explain something connected with his life to him, and, upon my explaining that this was impossible, he charged me to entreat you to come in his place. It appears that there is something on his mind, and

before he can die peacefully, he desires to confide it to Mr. Darnley, or in default of him, to you, his nearest friend. I trust you will comply with his request and give what comfort you can to this man, who has to face death whilst in full possession of his senses, which is a solemn and awful thing."

"When shall I see him," I asked eagerly, "naturally I cannot refuse the request of a dying man." I knew that by doing so I should at last unravel the tangled skein of the mystery, and the knowledge increased my anxiety to see the wretched man.

"I have promised that you should go there this afternoon," replied the doctor gravely, "for I do not think he has many hours to live, as the paralysis has reached his arms and hands. Prepare yourself for a scene of the most touching despair on the part of the unfortunate lady, whom I cannot but pity. Her extreme beauty renders her grief the more distressing to see."

It was settled that I should go to the Saragas's house that afternoon, and accordingly I nerved myself for the effort, for I dreaded the interview intensely, and, as I knew how dreadful must be the grief of Juanita, it was a terrible duty to perform even for the sake of a friendship such as mine and Jack's. I could not, however distasteful, shrink from this last test, and with a sad heart I set out to hear the last words from the sinking man. All my curiosity

seemed to have been swallowed up in the intense solemnity of the fact that I was to stand in the presence of death, who but waited for the fitting moment, to claim a still conscious victim. I could not even feel anger, whatever the man's crimes might be, for a vengeance mightier than any belonging to this world threatened the wretched being, whose mental anguish alone, was a punishment for his sins.

CHAPTER XVII.

LET ME DIE IN PEACE.

I left the hut where Jack lay, and walked up to the Saragas's house full of grave thoughts of the coming interview, and a chill of nervous apprehension, lest the man had paid the last tribute before I reached him, ran through me. I rang the bell and the same woman answered, requesting me to wait whilst she informed her mistress of my arrival, she intimated that, as she knew I was expected, my wait would probably be of short duration. She returned in a few minutes requesting me to follow her, saying her mistress would receive me in the room next to that occupied by the injured man, as she could not leave him. I followed and was ushered into a small room comfortably, almost luxuriously, furnished which bore the evident traces of having been used in happier times for a boudoir. I stood in anxious expectation and the door opened and Juanita entered. Her face was white and drawn with a hopeless look of misery in the deep blue eyes, in which there was no trace or sign of tears, but only a stony agony terrible to see.

The fair hair curled round her brows, and added with its shining halo to the general effect of something supernatural, which was so remarkable now that she was so white. The transparent delicacy of her face and hands gave an almost shadowy appearance to her, and she seemed as if wasted, in form as well as face, by her misery. She spoke in a low voice with a sound of such despair in it that my heart ached for her, and bad as she might be, at that moment I could but pity her sorrow.

"He is there, Mr. Trentham," she half whispered, stretching out her thin hand, with the blue veins showing through the transparent skin, and pointing to the next room, "come or you will be too late. For God's sake be merciful to him, he is a dying man."

I could find no words, but I bent my head in reply and followed her as she led the way. I entered the room and before me lay the dying man, his face white as marble, with a faint blue shadow round the lips, which told me his hours, perhaps even minutes, were numbered. His hands lay on the soft white covering of the bed, useless and like those of a corpse, with sunken muscles and flaccid fingers. I almost uttered a cry of horror as I looked again, for the eyes, bright with an unnatural light and with close knit brows, were those of Mrs. De Mora, and the cruel smile still playing on the lips, showed the small square teeth and curved lips which had been one of her chief

features. The smile that flickered upon the drawn lips faded, and in a low but clear voice, I heard the confession from the dying man of his share in the past tragedy.

"I have won the stakes I played for, Mr. Trentham, but I am not allowed to enjoy my triumph" he said, "I know that I am a dying man, nay dead, I might say, for all that lives of me is my brain and heart, so I ask of you all that can now be done this side of the grave. It is to listen patiently, and this you will not refuse me, since my time is so short. Revenge you cannot dream of now, upon the mass of helpless clay which I am, and upon her you will not take it, when I am dead."

Juanita threw herself into a low chair by the bed, and taking one of his motionless hands between her own, flung her head down and lay sobbing and kissing the lifeless fingers as he continued.

"You know me, I see, I knew it that day as I lay upon the path when they picked me up. I saw the look of recognition and then the puzzled frown as you turned away. But you were right, you did know me. How could you tell that I was Mrs. De Mora, and yet not she, as you knew her? Listen and you shall know all. Four years ago I met Juanita and we loved each other, but her parents, rich people, would not give her to me, for I had but a small fortune, so I, never able to bear refusal, took her from them. We ran away and I married her,

you can find it all registered if you choose to seek at Santiago. Then we came here, not wishing to be recognised, and lived as Señor Saragas and his wife. The happiest years any man could live they were: but the time came when my money was nearly spent, for I always hoped Juanita's parents would forgive her, they refused to see her and I had to live. Then came the idea into my head that I would take Juanita into the world again. I could not leave her, and I was madly jealous of her beauty, so I dressed myself as a woman, and calling myself Mrs. De Mora, went about with her as her mother. You can guess that I hoped to find some rich man who would want to marry her, and then when the settlements were made,—well I was spared that crime. You know what happened then, and how Jack Darnley was the man who wanted to marry my wife." Here another of the horrible cruel smiles curled his lips, as he saw me stand speechless and frozen with horror at this calm confession of unutterable vice. "I went to his room at your house, Mr. Trentham, and searched his papers till I found one in which he had ordered a deed of gift for the money we wanted, I read it in Juanita's room, and then replaced it unnoticed the next day. I saw that she must go through the form of marriage to get the money we stood in need of, and now you know why she left England. She is my wife, and I resumed my proper dress, and took her with me. We have the

money but I am dying, and therefore, though I won the game I played, I am robbed of the triumph."

He paused. "That is all," he added, "leave me to die in peace."

I stood for one minute, unable to move, with my eyes fixed upon the wreck before me, it was so utterly incomprehensible that, as he lay there with the prospect of death so close, he could still be impenitent, and I hesitated for a time, half forming some words with a view to calling him to a tardy repentance, before his awful and inevitable fate overtook him. The words were frozen on my lips by the look I saw creep over the wretched man's face. All seemed to change in one moment, a blaze of triumph shone in his dark eyes, fading almost before I could draw a breath, followed by a terrible glassy stare and the relaxation of the facial muscles. This was as I knew death, or at any rate collapse, which of the two it was hard to determine, but I could not leave the wretched woman, whose head was still buried in the bedclothes, as she sobbed convulsively. I moved a step closer, and touching her gently, told her to give him a restorative as I feared he had fainted. I did not dare to say the word that I feared, but as she raised her head, and looked at the face of the man, which lay upon the pillow, a cry of exquisite agony rang from her, and she sprang up laying her head on his breast to listen for the beating of his heart. She looked

at me with a glare of mad terror in her eyes, as if to beg me not to leave her and to assist if I could at this awful moment. Mechanically I stepped yet nearer, and between us we raised the head of the wretched man.

I saw at once that human aid could do no more, for the poor sunken eyes would not again see the light of this world, and, from the clay coloured lips, a thin stream of fluid oozed sluggishly. I whispered to the poor creature by my side to send for the doctor, not because I thought his aid of use, but just to try to recall her from the contemplation of the dead man. Her face was rigid as the dead almost, as she raised her head, and with a slow sign of having understood me she turned to the door. I heard her call in a husky voice to the woman and give her the order to send to the doctor, and in one second she reappeared. She held in her hand something which I could not see, but, as she drew back the bedclothes and laid an object upon the breast of the dead man, I guessed it might have been a crucifix or some relic of religious meaning; if they had a religion to observe the rites of. She looked at me with the quiet stony grief in her face, utterly tearless, which made me fear for her reason, and the dry lips parted and I heard the words "Leave us" in a husky whisper.

I withdrew as silently as I could but it was impossible to leave the house, and I went through the door into the little boudoir adjoining, closing the door gently behind me,

to await there the arrival of the doctor. When once I was alone the full horror of the situation came before me. What was to become of the miserable guilty woman who had allowed herself to be one of the chief actors in the foul plot? How could Jack ever forget the incident, or find peace again when he heard of the snare into which he had been entrapped? For one short moment it flitted across my brain that perhaps, if he at length found that the woman whom he had loved with such reckless passion was free, he would forgive the past. I shook this off as I would the effects of a nightmare, for Jack could never descend to such a depth, and proceeded to turn over in my mind a thousand possibilities for the future. I walked to the window to look what aspect it had and saw that it gave a direct view of the path approaching the house, and up this I saw two figures which I conjectured to be the doctor and the messenger who had been sent for him. Drawing my watch from my pocket I saw that it might very well be so, for in the excitement of the past events, I had not noticed the flight of time, and he could have had ample opportunity to receive the hasty summons, and answer it. I was much relieved, and my thoughts once more turned to speculations as to the future, when it struck me that I would try to find the servant by whom I had been admitted and warn her of the approach of the doctor. I opened the outer door of the room in which I was cautiously, and

caught sight of the woman, in an attitude of attention by a window in the passage, which as far as I could judge, gave the same view of the surrounding country as the one of the room where I was. She turned her head as she heard the gentle sound of the opening door and, in answer to a signal from me to approach, came towards me. Just as I formed the words to tell her of the two figures being in all probability those of the doctor and the messenger I was startled by a sharp noise from the adjoining room.

The woman pushed past me with a frightened look, and I felt instinctively that I must follow her, we arrived almost together at the closed door and without a second's hesitation the woman threw it open. Before us was a ghastly sight, the figure of the man lay motionless on the bed, and over the lifeless breast wandered a thin stream of crimson, dying the white linen that covered his form. Lying across his prostrate body, with the beautiful head laid against his heart as if to hear its last beat, was the form of Juanita. I sprang forward to assist the woman to raise her and we both saw that in one of her delicate hands she held, with the firm grip of death, a small revolver. Upon turning the lifeless head, still so fair with the light shadowy golden curls dabbled at the temple with still warm sticky blood, we saw a little blue wound through which the bullet had entered, and knew that she had put an end to her life, dying on the bosom of him whom she had loved well enough to follow

through crime; and she did not shrink from the penalty of death so that it was shared with him. I could not but feel impressed by the utter devotion of this sinning woman, whose one thought had been for the being she loved, until the very end, when she chose death on his breast to life without him. The object I had seen her lay on his bosom before leaving the room had evidently been this small pistol; with which she had even then deliberately planned to take her own life. Seeing that life was extinct I told the weeping servant to fetch the doctor up to the room. He entered and after a short examination told me that nothing could now be done and, as it was too painful a scene to remain witnesses to, we left the room, and the house, never to set foot within them more. The mortal remains of these two could as well be left to the care of those who had served them, and we both felt, that our mission being over, we might turn our backs for ever upon the ghastly scene. Our walk back was a silent one, and I begged the advice of Dr. Morgan as to telling Jack of the tragedy that had occurred in connection with these two who had sinned against him. He undertook to tell Jack upon the first opportunity that offered, when he should think his patient strong enough to bear such news. This settled I felt I could leave it in Dr. Morgan's hands, and indeed I was so unnerved, that I do not think I could have told the tale myself.

The doctor warned me that he thought that the shock being so great would probably cause a relapse, but he assured me that he should use all the means he could to postpone telling Jack until he thought he was strong enough to bear it.

My duties in telling the story of the chief event in Jack Darnley's life are now nearly over, and there is little more for me to add before I may lay down my pen. Suffice it to say that although, Dr. Morgan watched his opportunity as carefully as he could, when Jack became finally aware of what had happened he succumbed to another attack of fever which attacked his brain, and that for weeks he lay between life and death. My aunt and sister nursed him with intense devotion; and by slow degrees the poor fellow grew back to health and strength.

In the course of time, although I think that he never can quite have forgotten the misery he had been through, or that his heart can have been quite healed, for he never again was the old careless, thoughtless companion, Jack grew to some extent to have a fresh interest in life. Some years after the time I have spoken of he and Gerry were married, and they were a very happy devoted couple, although at times Jack would look sad and thoughtful as if the shadow could never quite leave his life, but my sister loved him too thoroughly and was too good a woman, to ever allude for one moment to his sad past, and thus did

all she could to make him happy, and contented with her unselfish care and love. As for me, one of my chief interests is in them, and their children who will be my heirs as they are my nearest male relations now left. No tale, to be true to life, can be told to the entire satisfaction of the reader, and so I must be excused if I have to record one more sad incident, but some allusion to the conclusion of the lives of Mary Ravenhill and myself is obligatory, and as life is so often a disappointment, even where its promises seem fairest, so her story and mine is no uncommon ending to what bid fair to be the record of a certain happiness for us both.

We married in the spring following the events related, and the deep tender happiness of our lives in the few short months that ensued is too well engraved upon my heart, and too bitterly regretted, for me to do more than allude lightly to it. It was not ordained for me to live a life of utter contentment and peace in the companionship and love of such a woman as Mary, and upon the birth of our first child I was called upon to resign her to the hands of Providence, against whose command I rebelled but had no appeal. The child upon whom I, in the first despair of my grief, could not bear to look, has grown up with the bright hair and soft eyes of her mother, and as she gazes at me I can but forgive her that her innocent life cost me so dearly, and occupy myself with plans for her happiness.

If I found myself saddened beyond comfort, I had her welfare to guard, and that of my sister and her husband, and the children that were born to them in after years.

THE END

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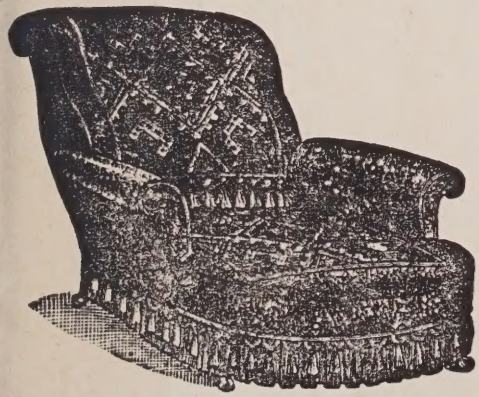

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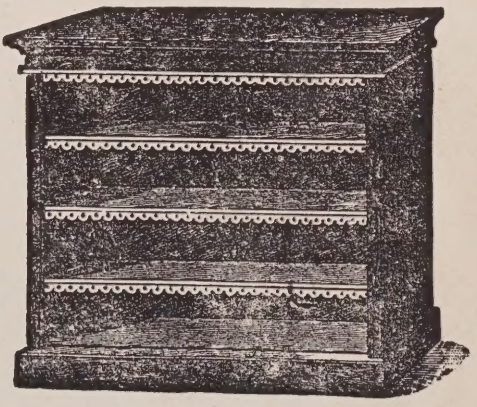

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